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Parent-child relationships and adults' worldviews¹

The paper presents research findings on relationships between parental attitudes and family climate and three aspects of grown-up children's worldviews: general trust, the belief that the social environment is dangerous and the notion of social Darwinism (the notion that social relations are exclusively antagonistic). The theoretical starting point is provided by the idea that perceptions of the social world and ways in which people engage in relationships with others are predicated on a more or less secure identity shaped as a result of early socialization (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990, 1999). The more adult individuals feel that they can establish relationships with people without fearing for their own autonomy and independence (a feeling that largely hinges on parental attitudes), the brighter their views of the world are.

The research study conducted using individual questionnaire-based interviews included a sample of 850 adult Poles, representative of Poland's adult population as a whole (in terms of the proportional distribution of age, sex, education and residence). Parental attitudes of mothers and fathers of the respondents were measured by means of a shortened version of the *Kwestionariusz Retrospekcyjnych Postaw Rodzicielskich* (KPR-Roc, Retrospective Parental Attitude Questionnaire), developed by M. Plopa (2008). The climate of family homes was assessed on the scale of openness to vs. distrust of people from outside the family. The respondents' views of the social world were measured by means of three scales: Trust vs. Distrust, Dangerous World and Social Darwinism, all of which have been widely applied in other research and found to be valid and reliable (cf. Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Skarżyńska, 2019).

Analyses of the results have shown that the general family climate and some attitudes of mothers and fathers are significant factors. Specifically, fathers' excessive protection and inconsistency and mothers' inconsistency and strong approval are correlated with more negativist beliefs about the world in grown-up children.

Keywords: parental attitudes: acceptance, autonomy, exaggerated demands, protection, inconsistency; worldviews: general trust, dangerous world beliefs, social Darwinism

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There is a quantity of trustworthy studies on the relevance of childhood to the formation of personalities, worldviews and attitudes of adults. There is also an overall consensus in academic psychology today that childhood is an important stage in human development. However, various research frameworks and approaches widely differ on how strongly parents and the domestic educational environment, including intentional and deliberate influences of mothers and fathers, affect children's minds and which particular areas of the child's psyche are most amenable to this impact. The dominant notion holds that early parental socialisation is indeed relevant, but how much of this early family influence actually persists in adulthood depends on the later experiences of individuals as they grow up – on whether these experiences reinforce values and beliefs instilled at home or whether they modify or profoundly alter such views. The research I have conducted on nationwide samples of adults over several years has shown that there is a significant association between what people experienced from their mothers and fathers in childhood and their world perceptions in adulthood. However, parental influence is not the only factor that explains the differentiation of their worldviews. Socio-demographic factors – such as the level of education, income and the place of residence – also play an important role in this respect. This is what this paper explores in order to assist family counsellors and counselling researchers in their work.

This year, the Covid-19 pandemic has made parents spend much more time with their children than was usually the case before. As parents worked from home for many months, they were with their children day and night. This did not involve exclusively joyful moments of intimacy; some difficult rules and day agendas often had to be negotiated, especially with teenagers. More explicitly than ever before, parents had to choose how much discipline and obedience they should demand and how much autonomy they should grant their kids, allowing them to manage their free time on their own. Psychologists believe that this aspect of parent-child relations is key to nurturing subjectivity and capacity to define the I-We boundaries. Anderson and Sabatelli (1990, 1999), theorists and researchers of family socialisation, argue that the core of this process lies in fostering what they call a secure identity. Such an identity helps one establish closer relations with other people without fearing submission, emotional dependency or the loss of autonomy. Other recognised researchers of values, Deci and Ryan (2000), link this aspect of relations not only to children's acquisition of experience of both autonomy and belonging to a community (one that is usually similar to them in one way or another) but also to the development of their self-efficacy and ability to achieve their intended goals.

Family climate and parental attitudes of mothers and fathers vs. grown-up children's perceptions of the social world

For several decades now, researchers of social life have argued that the quality of life of individuals, social groups and entire societies is intimately associated with the levels of generalised trust toward people, security and the belief in the feasibility of collaborations with others. The more distrust and the sense of danger there is and the stronger or more commonly people believe that the world is a social jungle in which relations among individuals and groups are exclusively antagonistic, governed by force and based on exploitation of others, the less life satisfaction individuals and groups feel, the lower their effectiveness in work and innovation is, and the weaker their democratic institutions are (cf. e.g. Arts & Halman, 2002; Bartal, 2007; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Fukuyama, 2001; Inglehart, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Skarżyńska, 2012, 2019; Sztompka, 2007).

Given that these three lenses through which we look at the world – distrust, the sense of threat in the social environment and the belief that we live in a social jungle, which is also referred to as “social Darwinism” (cf. Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Skarżyńska & Radkiewicz, 2011, 2015; Skarżyńska, 2019) – are so essentially relevant to the quality of life, I set out to establish whether and, if so, how these attitudes among adult Poles are associated with their parents' attitudes to them as children and with the general climate of families in which they had been growing up. The study involved a nationwide random sample of 850 adults and relied on questionnaire-based individual interviews. First the respondents were asked about the behaviour and attitudes their fathers and mothers had displayed vis-à-vis them and then about their own notions of the world as described above. Parental attitudes were measured using the *Kwestionariusz Retrospektywnych Postaw Rodziców* (KPR-Roc, Retrospective Parental Attitude Questionnaire) developed by Mieczysław Plopa (2008) in a shortened version (adapted in view of pilot research results). The questionnaire included five scales, and each of them was comprised of five statements: 1) acceptance scale (e.g.: “S/he made it clear to me that that s/he loved me.”); 2) autonomy scale (e.g.: “When I argued that s/he was wrong, s/he let me have my way.”); 3) exaggerated demand scale (e.g.: “S/he required that I always obey him/her.”); 4) protection scale (e.g.: “S/he always wanted to know where I was and with whom.”); and 5) inconsistency scale (e.g.: “When s/he was upset, I never knew how s/he'd behave toward me.”). The respondents completed the same questionnaire twice: once for the mother and once for the father (in a randomly changing sequence). The questionnaire had repeatedly been examined for reliability and validity, i.e. the degree to which its results were consistent with the real attitudes of the parents of people who retrospectively assessed these attitudes. It was found that adults as a rule aptly described the attitudes of their parents (Plopa, 2008).

The respondents were also asked to assess the general climate of their families in their childhood. The scale used for this purpose had openness to people from outside family and distrust of strangers at its respective extremes.

In the following phase of the study, the respondents completed (again in a random order) three scales concerning the social world. The distrust vs. trust scale included seven statements, such as: "One shouldn't trust other people until one gets to know them really well" and "In these hostile times, one should keep on one's guard because one can easily be cheated." The less the respondents agreed with such statements (on the scale ranging from 1 to 6), the higher their general trust was.

The sense of threat from the world around was measured using the Belief in a Dangerous World Scale (developed by Duckitt & Fisher, 2003), as translated and adapted to the Polish conditions by Piotr Radkiewicz. The scale contained ten items with which the respondents were supposed to agree or disagree (on the scale from 6 to 1). The items were, for example, "There are many people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all," and "Every day, as society are becoming more lawless and bestial, a person's chances of being robbed, assaulted or even murdered go up and up." Higher scores in this scale represented a stronger belief that the world was a threatening place. The third scale – the Social Darwinism Scale – assessed the extent of the belief that the world was a place of ruthless rivalry, where cynical egoists won by taking advantage of other people's vulnerabilities. Like the previous one, this scale was also developed by Duckitt and Fisher. It consisted of fifteen items, rated from 1 (I strongly disagree) to 6 (I strongly agree). Examples of the items were: "If one needs to be vindictive and ruthless to achieve one's aims, one should do so," and "Honesty is the best policy in all cases" (reverse coding). Higher scores on this scale indicated a stronger belief that the world was a social jungle.

What are the major findings of this study and what do they tell us about parental attitudes remembered from childhood and about the relations between these attitudes and adult Poles' worldviews? The research has found that adult Poles assess their mothers and fathers as deeply accepting people who expressed love and support for their children (the mean score on the acceptance scale was 4.28 for mothers and 3.85 for fathers, as rated from 1 to 5) and gave their children autonomy (the mean score for mothers stood at 4.00 and for fathers, at 3.80). Excessive protection also scored high: the mean for mothers reached 4.05 and for fathers, 3.63. Two other parental attitudes were assessed by the grown-up children as far less characteristic of their parents: exaggerated demands were rated at 3.20 and 3.19 for mothers and fathers, respectively, while inconsistency stood at 2.34 for mothers and at 2.44 for fathers. The attitudes of acceptance, autonomy and protection were positively correlated with one another, whereas acceptance and autonomy were negatively correlated with excessive demands and inconsistency (in other words, the higher mothers and fathers scored on the acceptance and anatomy scales, the lower the parental demands and inconsistency were rated). The general climate of distrust of

strangers was most strongly associated with the exaggerated demands ($r = 0.30$), excessive protection ($r = 0.21$) and inconsistency ($r = 0.20$) of mothers while it was less strongly, but still positively, correlated with all attitudes of both parents. This finding occasions some concern because it implies that Polish parents instil (not necessarily consciously, though) a generalised distrust of people in their children, no matter what attitudes mothers and fathers actually express vis-à-vis their offspring. Unsurprisingly, this belief about the world is more common in our society than in other European countries. In my research study, the mean level of trust in a nationwide sample of adults was 2.75 (as rated on the 1-to-6 scale).

To establish with which parental attitudes the three examined worldview components are associated and how strong the association is, multiple regression analyses were carried out. These statistical analyses show the strength of correlations between the variables, in this case – between particular influences of mothers and fathers and the education, age, declared incomes and place of residence of the respondents on the one hand and the three world beliefs described above on the other. Specifically, multiple regression analyses revealed that the general family climate exerted the strongest effect on these attitudes. The more distrustful of strangers the climate of their family homes in childhood was assessed to have been by grown-up Poles (as measured by their agreement with statements such as “My parents above all taught me to be cautious in relations with people”, and “My parents warned me against people’s greed, envy and malice”), the lower levels of trust they reported, the more they felt threatened in the world, and the deeper they believed the world to be a social jungle. The negative predictors of trust (e.g. the variables that reduced trust levels) also included two attitudes of parents: excessive protection and inconsistency in responses to their children’s conduct. At the same time, trust was increased by two demographic characteristics of the respondents: better education and higher income. Importantly, only fathers’ attitudes significantly differentiated the level of trust, and all the studied variables explained a considerable proportion of the variance in the trust level (as measured by the R squared – the coefficient of determination – for the entire regression equation, which stood at 40%).

Parental attitudes were found to explain a far smaller proportion of the variance in the reported dangerous world beliefs (R-squared = 20%) and in the acceptance of the notion of the world as a social jungle (R-squared = 27%). Probably, these two world perceptions to a larger extent depend on experiences unrelated to childhood. Parental attitudes of mothers were only found to be significant in explaining the level of endorsement for the notion of the world as a social jungle: mothers’ greater inconsistency and their greater acceptance exhibited vis-à-vis children were associated with grown-up children’s stronger belief that the world was governed by the law of the jungle. Nevertheless, the general climate of distrust in the family home was shown to be a stronger predictor of this belief. As can be seen, a negative world perception can be associated both with mothers’ inconsistent conduct and with their expression of love and acceptance. I attribute this to the link between

both of these attitudes and the climate of distrust of strangers, which is quite common in Polish homes. The detailed result of regression analyses for the three studied worldviews are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables explaining various worldviews of adult Poles: Regression analysis results (the numbers represent standardised beta regression coefficients)

| Explaining variables (predictors) | Explained variables | | |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | Trust | Dangerous world | Social Darwinism |
| Distrust climate at home | 0.34** | 0.22** | 0.19* |
| Education | 0.26** | -0.20** | -0.15* |
| Family income | 0.11* | -0.14* | n.s. |
| Respondent age | -0.14* | n.s. | n.s. |
| Excessive protection from father | -0.10* | n.s. | n.s. |
| Father's inconsistency | -0.09* | n.s. | 0.17* |
| Father's exaggerated demands | n.s. | 0.14* | n.s. |
| Mother's inconsistency | n.s. | n.s. | 0.18* |
| Acceptance from mother | n.s. | n.s. | 0.14* |
| Proportion of the explained variance (R-squared) for the entire equation | 40% | 20% | 27% |

** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.01$.

These analyses prove that beliefs about the social world, which are of relevance to social life, are associated with parental influences. What must be borne in mind, however, is that this concerns influences as remembered by adults rather than as examined through direct observations of parental behaviour. Nevertheless, studies which have observed parents' actual conduct or measured their declared attitudes have shown similar correlations (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bowlby, 1988; Collins & Read, 1990; Skarżyńska, 1991; Skarżyńska & Radkiewicz, 2009).

Family is only one of multiple environments that are capable of affecting world perceptions and shaping beliefs which are conducive or adverse to the quality of life of individuals and social groups. The research study reported above has also revealed that education and income from work importantly contribute to people's worldviews. This implies that the resources of social capital that individuals acquire in adulthood bolster their trust and lower their sense of threat and cynical beliefs that only force and egoism matter in the world.

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