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## **Sense of Coherence in Adolescents in the Context of Parents' Attitudes and Support**

### **Abstract**

The subject of the study is the analysis of relations between the sense of coherence (SOC) in adolescents and their perception of parental attitudes and support received from both parents. The dependence between the level of SOC in adolescents and parents' education and material status of the family have also been taken into account. The study group consisted of 105 people aged 17–18, boys and girls – secondary school pupils. The obtained results confirm a considerable part of the assumptions included in the hypotheses indicating the existence of a significant dependence between the rejection attitude of both parents and SOC, demanding an attitude of both parents and a protective attitude of father and SOC. The dependence between global, information and instrumental support received from mothers and SOC and between emotional support from fathers and SOC were confirmed. However, it turned out that loving and liberal attitudes of both parents do not show any relation with SOC. No dependence was found between evaluative support and the level of the sense of coherence in adolescents. The study shows that the education of both parents and the material status of the family are of significant importance in forming the level of SOC.

**Key words:** *sense of coherence, the period of adolescence, parental attitudes, social support.*

## **Introduction**

Antonovsky's works (1979, 1984) about health in the paradigm of salutogenesis inspired numerous investigations in the area of psychology of health. They search for factors that promote health or help to regain balance in spite of stresses and problems that happen in everybody's life. This approach falls into the current of positive psychology, the research of which is oriented at looking for resources increasing people's abilities to cope with problems of life. Coping consists in the ability to use internal resources (e.g. intelligence, resistance, personality features) or external ones (e.g. social support) in responding to difficulties. In accordance with the concept of salutogenesis, important personal resources include the sense of coherence (SOC) defined by the author of this concept as "global orientation of a person expressing the degree of his/her general, long-lasting, although dynamic sense of confidence where: a) stimuli of the external or internal environment are structured, predictable and possible to explain; b) resources sufficient to match up the demands imposed by these stimuli are available; c) demands constitute a challenge that is worthy of engagement and taking action" (Antonovsky, 1987, p.19, acc. to: Jelonkiewicz, 1994, p.57). What follows from this definition is that SOC is a cognitive structure that decides about a person's way of understanding, ordering and interpreting events that happen in the world, and also affects undertaking adequate actions. The concept of SOC has got three inter-related components: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. The level of SOC is formed under the influence of experiences throughout a person's life, however the periods of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood are regarded as particularly important. The development of the components of the sense of coherence depends on characteristic features of individual experiences. According to Antonovsky, they should be analysed in the categories of: consistency, underload-overload balance in demands imposed on an individual and his/her participation in making decisions and being responsible for them.

Experiences resulting from relations with people important for an individual are regarded as essential in the development of his/her resistance resources. Contacts between parents and children certainly belong to that category. They affect one's mental state and indirectly - somatic health. A special kind of situation of exercising influence is social support defined as resources supplied to an individual by other people from his/her environment (Cohen, Syme, 1985). Social support can be important in reducing strain and other negative emotions caused by strong stressors, it can also contribute to increasing the ability of an individual to anticipate difficult situations and cope with stress.

**Problem:**

In accordance with Antonovsky's suggestions (1995, 1997) shaping the sense of coherence of an individual in early periods of life depends on his/her experiences in interpersonal relations with people significant to him/her and social environment conditions. More and more studies look for connections between variables called external resistance resources (environmental factors) and the level of the sense of coherence. The conclusions from the studies indicate the dependence between the strength of the sense of coherence of adolescents on some variables of family environment (Kosińska-Dec, Jelonkiewicz, 2001; Mroziak *et al.*, 1999; Worsztynowicz, 2001; Zwoliński, 2000). The research presented in this paper refers to investigations aimed at explaining conditions of the development of the sense of coherence. The subject of the study is the dependence between the level of the sense of coherence (SOC) and its components in young people and parental attitudes and support of both parents perceived by them. The dependence between SOC and parents' education and the material status of the family has also been examined.

**Hypotheses:**

1. The global level of SOC and the levels of its components in adolescents depend on parental attitudes of mother and father.
2. The global level of SOC and the levels of its components depend on the kind and strength of social support received from both parents.
3. The global level of SOC and the levels of its components depend on the parents' education and material status of the family.

**Study group:**

The study group was composed of 105 students (girls and boys) at the age of 17–18, from three last grades in two randomly selected secondary schools of general education in Katowice.\*

**Study tools:**

Life Orientation Questionnaire SOC-29 (in the authorized Polish version Koniarek *et al.*, 1993), Questionnaire on Relations between Parents and Children – PCR by Seligman and Roe III (in authorized translation of Kowalski), Social

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\* The studies were conducted by Ewa Augustyniak-Nawrot in the framework of MA thesis prepared under the supervision of the author entitled: "Forming the sense of coherence in adolescents and their perception of family functioning", University of Silesia in Katowice, 2002.

Support Scale (Kmiecik-Baran, 1995), Questionnaire concerning parents' education and self-assessment of the material status of the family. MANOVA statistical model and independence test  $X^2$  were used in data analysis.

### Results:

The presentation of the study results below has been limited only to these variables that showed dependence with SOC.

Significant dependence was marked with an asterisk (\*).

## 1. Dependence between kinds of parental attitudes and SOC

### 1.1. Rejection attitude and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's rejection attitude	Global level of SOC	2	.915	.404
	Comprehensibility	2	.051	.950
	Manageability	2	1.154	.320
	Meaningfulness	2	2.052	.134
Father's rejection attitude	Global level of SOC	2	1.266	.287
	Comprehensibility	2	1.916	.153
	Manageability	2	1.229	.297
	Meaningfulness	2	1.274	.284
Interaction between parents' attitudes	Global level of SOC	4	3.037	.021*
	Comprehensibility	4	1.441	.226
	Manageability	4	2.498	.048*
	Meaningfulness	4	3.547	.010*

The global level of SOC and the sense of manageability and meaningfulness depend on the interaction of rejection attitudes of both parents. This dependence is inversely proportional, which means that the more intensive the rejection attitude of both parents is, the lower level of the sense of meaningfulness, manageability and global level of SOC.

### 1.2. Demanding attitude and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's demanding attitude	Global level of SOC	2	3.484	.035*
	Comprehensibility	2	2.977	0.56
	Manageability	2	3.120	.049*
	Meaningfulness	2	2.271	.109
Father's demanding attitude	Global level of SOC	2	2.028	.137
	Comprehensibility	2	1.407	.250
	Manageability	2	1.278	.238
	Meaningfulness	2	2.150	.122
Interaction between parents' attitudes	Global level of SOC	4	3.291	.014*
	Comprehensibility	4	2.180	.077
	Manageability	4	2.281	.066
	Meaningfulness	4	3.261	.015*

The global level of SOC and manageability is dependent on the mother's demanding attitude. There is also clear dependence between the demanding attitudes of both parents and the global level of SOC and meaningfulness.

### 1.3 Protective attitude and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's protective attitude	Global level of SOC	2	.233	.792
	Comprehensibility	2	1.036	.359
	Manageability	2	.491	.614
	Meaningfulness	2	.422	.657
Father's protective attitude	Global level of SOC	2	3.799	.026*
	Comprehensibility	2	4.994	.009**
	Manageability	2	1.786	.173
	Meaningfulness	2	3.029	.053
Interaction between parents' attitudes	Global level of SOC	4	.558	.644
	Comprehensibility	4	.182	.908
	Manageability	4	1.093	.356
	Meaningfulness	4	.504	.680

The global level of SOC and comprehensibility are dependent on the father's protective attitude.

## 2. Dependence between kinds of parental support and SOC

### 2.1 Global parental support and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's global support	Global level of SOC	2	6.369	.003**
	Comprehensibility	2	3.890	.024*
	Manageability	2	4.379	.015*
	Meaningfulness	2	5.918	.004**
Father's global support	Global level of SOC	2	.886	.416
	Comprehensibility	2	.420	.658
	Manageability	2	.878	.419
	Meaningfulness	2	.758	.471
Interaction between support of both parents	Global level of SOC	4	.302	.876
	Comprehensibility	4	.221	.926
	Manageability	4	.656	.624
	Meaningfulness	4	.330	.857

There is dependence between the global support received from mothers and the global level of the sense of coherence and all of its components.

### 2.2 Information support and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's information support	Global level of SOC	2	10.395	.000***
	Comprehensibility	2	4.229	.017*
	Manageability	2	7.207	.001**
	Meaningfulness	2	12.228	.000***
Father's information support	Global level of SOC	2	.548	.580
	Comprehensibility	2	.000	1.000
	Manageability	2	.252	.778
	Meaningfulness	2	1.846	.163
Interaction between support of both parents	Global level of SOC	4	1.858	.124
	Comprehensibility	4	1.527	.201
	Manageability	4	1.082	.370
	Meaningfulness	4	2.141	.082

The global level of SOC and all its components depends on information support received from mother.

### 2.3 Instrumental support and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's instrumental support	Global level of SOC	2	3.108	.049*
	Comprehensibility	2	2.416	.095
	Manageability	2	2.286	.107
	Meaningfulness	2	2.638	.077
Father's instrumental support	Global level of SOC	2	1.372	.258
	Comprehensibility	2	1.943	.149
	Manageability	2	.591	.556
	Meaningfulness	2	.945	.392
Interaction between support of both parents	Global level of SOC	4	.990	.417
	Comprehensibility	4	1.483	.213
	Manageability	4	1.295	.278
	Meaningfulness	4	.202	.937

Only the global level of SOC is dependent on the instrumental support received from mother.

### 2.4 Emotional support and SOC

Independent variable	Dependent variable	df	F	Sig.
Mother's emotional support	Global level of SOC	2	1.895	.156
	Comprehensibility	2	2.620	.078
	Manageability	2	.591	.556
	Meaningfulness	2	1.882	.158
Father's emotional support	Global level of SOC	2	3.279	.042*
	Comprehensibility	2	3.159	.047*
	Manageability	2	.996	.373
	Meaningfulness	2	4.553	.013*
Interaction between attitudes of both parents	Global level of SOC	4	.429	.787
	Comprehensibility	4	1.747	.146
	Manageability	4	.645	.632
	Meaningfulness	4	.681	.607

The global level of SOC, meaningfulness and comprehensibility depend on the emotional support received from father.

### 3. Dependence between parents' education and material status of the family and SOC

#### 3.1. Parents' education and SOC

Components of SOC	Mother's education	Fathers' education
Global level	Chi <sup>2</sup> =35.33; p<0.05	Chi <sup>2</sup> =23.34; p<0.05
Manageability	Chi <sup>2</sup> =27.93; p<0.05	Chi <sup>2</sup> =16.30; p<0.05
Meaningfulness	Chi <sup>2</sup> =23.55; p<0.05	Chi <sup>2</sup> =13.49; p<0.05
Comprehensibility	Chi <sup>2</sup> =15.11; p<0.05	Chi <sup>2</sup> =13.12; p<0.05

#### 3.2. Self-assessment of the material status of the family and SOC

Components of SOC	Material status
Global level	Chi <sup>2</sup> =32,83; p<0.05
Manageability	Chi <sup>2</sup> =12.59; p<0.05
Meaningfulness	Chi <sup>2</sup> =27.80; p<0.05
Comprehensibility	Chi <sup>2</sup> =16.59; p<0.05

The global level of SOC and all its components depend on both parents' education and the self-assessment of the material status of the family.

#### Discussion:

The results of the study confirm the assumptions that gaining experience shaping the global life orientation – SOC is dependent on the attitudes and support of both parents, as well as on their education and the material status of the family. It should be noted here that two attitudes from PCR questionnaire: the loving and liberal ones did not show relation with SOC. No dependence was found between SOC and the evaluative support measured by the Social Support Scale. The qualitative analysis of the remaining results allows the conclusion that rejection attitudes of both parents create unfavourable conditions for the development of strong SOC. Parents' emotional distance, lack of friendly attention and increased tendency to criticise and punish their child limit the received positive reinforcement, which is necessary for the development of motivation to make efforts to cope with the tasks of life. Thus, parents' behaviour associated with that attitude does not promote building up a belief that it makes sense to set oneself goals, the achievement of which requires effort. Lack of attention and help from parents weakens the child's self-esteem and reinforces their conviction about a lack of influence on the course of events, which significantly lowers their ability to take appropriate actions,



especially when problems appear. Similar observations were made in earlier studies on children's coping with stress. What follows from them is that the lack of resourcefulness in difficult situations in case of children is clearly connected with negative emotions experienced by parents. Probably parents giving in to the pressure of negative feelings impose them on children or considerably restrict their educational activities, which can be interpreted by children as a lack of kindness and interest (of: McGrath and Pister, 1990; Compas, 1984).

The significant relations noted in the study between SOC and the demanding attitude of both parents make it possible to draw a conclusion that a clear definition of rules concerning demands from children and their consistent (but not restrictive) enforcement build an orderly structure of goals important to reach, thus increasing the sense of stability and predictability of events. The child becomes convinced that their efforts have sense, as their results are rewarded with parents' attention. Mother's demanding attitude proved to have a significant influence on the development of meaningfulness. Probably the basis for the development of the child's sense of competence in coping with problems is an early period of life, in which mother accompanies them most frequently and provides them with models of facing new challenges and rewarding success showing positive emotions. Mother's significant influence on the ways of coping with stress by their children was demonstrated in numerous other studies (of: Melamed and Bush, 1985; Seligman 1993, 1995).

Father's protective attitude plays a significant role in building strong SOC in children. It is expressed in supporting the child's efforts to explore the surrounding world, to acquire new experiences and skills, combined with ensuring security. Perceiving father as a protective person is connected in the child with confidence in his strength and readiness to provide help in difficult situations. Thus, it can be supposed that father's protective attitude gives the child courage necessary for getting to know the world and makes events occurring in it more understandable. The importance of the fact that father accompanies the child in a friendly way in their development tasks was also confirmed in other studies showing that it affects aspirations and need for achievements, as well as the child's motivation of self-improvement (of: Pospiszył, 1980).

Mothers' support is of great importance for acquiring experiences important in SOC development; a high level of mother's total support corresponds positively with the global level of SOC and all its components. Particularly strong dependence was observed between the level of support received from mother and the level of the meaningfulness component. It can be supposed that a supportive mother encourages the child to make efforts, rewards their achievements confirming their belief in their ability to use their own and other people's resources. Therefore

mother's support is important for development of child's self-confidence, which makes it easier to perceive even difficult situations as challenges motivating to efforts aimed at achieving goals regarded as valuable. Also information support received from mothers is important for the development of the meaningfulness and manageability components. It means that mothers providing the child with knowledge about events, explaining their meaning, and providing models of behaviour in life situations considerably model ways of coping both in natural situations resulting from the course of life (such as self-service, contacts with people) and show how to recognize special situations and how to cope with them (e.g. disease diagnoses and treatment). In the light of the conducted study it turns out that mother's education activity consisting in providing competent explanations and guidelines equips the child with practical skills increasing their resourcefulness. It should be assumed that good effects of their actions increase the child's belief that it makes sense to undertake further tasks of life, positively affecting the development of SOC resources. Parents' emotional support proved to be an important factor in the development of meaningfulness and comprehensibility. This result confirms the significance of the earlier noticed dependence between father's protective attitude and the level of SOC indicating that father's acceptance creates secure conditions in the process of the child's learning behaviour increasing their resistant resources. The dependence between the level of education, material status and health in the family was found in many studies (of. Green, 1979; Dielman et al., 1982; Tinsley and Holtgrave, 1989; Comas-Diaz, 1996 and others). These relations are also clearly visible in the discussed study. Parents' good education by itself constitutes an important resource thanks to which the family can increase other resources (a satisfying job, better income, apartment etc.). In our culture good material status indicates efficient task management - and usually it is also connected with good social status of such families. And this, in turn, in a natural way makes educational, cultural and recreational possibilities available to the children in this way creating potentially optimal conditions for the development of the sense of coherence. The dependence between the sense of coherence and the material status of the family seems to be obvious, the interpretation of it, however, should take into account the complex context of the family life conditions, because the most recent studies have revealed that problem behaviour in fourteen-year-olds is more frequent in well-off families in comparison to those in a less favourable financial situation (Bobrowski, 2004).

## **Conclusions**

1. The conducted study indicates the dependence of the sense of coherence on parental attitudes: *rejection, demanding and protective* ones. No relation was found between SOC and *loving and liberal* attitudes.
  - There are significant relations between SOC and the interaction of rejection attitudes of both parents (they are of inversely proportional character).
  - There are significant relations between SOC and the interaction of demanding attitudes of both parents and mother's demanding attitude.
  - SOC depends on protective father's attitude.
2. The study confirms the dependence of the sense of coherence on *the global, information, instrumental and emotional* support received from parents. No dependence was found between *evaluative* support and SOC.
  - There are significant relations between SOC and the level of global support received from mothers.
  - There is highly significant dependence between SOC and instrumental support received from mothers and father's emotional support.
3. The study confirms positive relations between the *level of education* of both parents and good *self-assessment of the material status* of the family and the level of global SOC and its components.

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