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FACULTY OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

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The Effects of Micro Environmental Factors on the Development of Social Competence in Pre-School Children

PhD   THESIS

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1. Introduction

The focus of our research is the social competence of preschool children and the family background of their social development, which we study sociologically, but conferring an interdisciplinary character to it. Our research concentrates on two questions:

- Do the social competence indicators that we studied and the relations between them confirm those features of social behavior of preschoolers that empirical researches presume?

- What kind of structural – demographic, socioeconomic and cultural – factors contribute to the development of children's social competence?

Although the study of children's social skills has encountered great interest in the last 30 years in psychological and pedagogical research – in Hungary and Romania it hasn't been too popular, only a few studies have been published on the topic. Nonetheless, the study of social competence in early childhood reflected by social processes is very poor in international sociological research as well. Its cause can be found mainly in methodological features. As preschoolers cannot read and write, questionnaires cannot be used in their assessment, what is more, we have to take into consideration that the thinking of young preschoolers is led by desire and situations. The instability of their answers and the children's dependence on adults makes it recommendable to consider the viewpoint of many people in the research. When we sum up all the features of the research done on preschoolers, we can safely say that it takes a lot of time and human resources to be organized. The numerous diversified components of social competence and its intra- and interpersonal character makes difficult measure it objectively. Furthermore, we have to admit that only the postmodern sociological approaches started to deal with childhood, where the child's culture is not inferior to that of adults. In this new approach it is also important that children's development is closely linked to such dimensions as gender, ethnic group etc.

The present research takes the challenge to a multidimensional analyze of social competence of preschool children and studies its correlations with demographic and family background factors. Social competence will be studied the following indicators: (1) interpersonal

coping mechanisms (2) the development of social skills observed at home and in kindergarten, (3) and the peer-perceived likability.

The family, as the primary agent of socialization, has great contribution to the social development of a child due to its caretaking, model-offering and educational functions, through which the parents' socioeconomic status and life quality is also reflected. The research studies how the structural factors of society can influences the development of social competence of preschoolers through their home environment including SES variables and psychosocial aspects. Social processes nowadays constantly inclines the individual to adapt to new situations (Lahire, 2012, Dubet, 2012), that is the reason why studying social competence is very important at an early age, when impregnation happens.

The first chapter introduces the theme by highlighting the importance of it. Researches have proved that preschool time is a sensitive period in the development of social competence. According to a Hungarian research made in 2004, 15% of children start school without being ready from a social point of view[1]. This consequently leads to negative impact on their performance in school (Denham et al., 2012) Early social competence is also proved to be related to mental health (Spitzberg, 2008). These outlined researches certifies how important it is to pay attention to the differentiation of social development and its sensitive aspects in preschool years, creating equality for educational achievement.

The third subchapter of the first introductive chapter describes the situation of social competence reaserch and early development in Romania and neighbourhoods, which both are very poor yet, so that the present research it is supposed to be a niche.

2. Literature review on Social Competence

The second chapter deals with the fundaments of research on social competence in the literature of specialty. The first two subchapters presents the concept of social competence and its factors via different perspectives. The third subchapter is describing the characteristics of social competence and its assessment at the age of 3-7, while the next subchapter reveals the previous findings about gender differences in children's social behaviour.

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[1] József Nagy és mtsai., *Az elemi alapkézségek fejlődése 4-8 éves életkorban: Difer programcsomag* (Budapest: Mozaik, 2004).

2.1. Definition of Social Competence

Semrud-Clikeman (2007) defines social competence being as „the ability to respond flexibly and a person's ability to handle the social challenges". As the definition itself implies, social competence is, in fact, a "response" to a certain social situation. According to Piaget (1983) it is very important that children find themselves in situations of social conflict during their play, to practice problem solving by exchanging views: understanding the thoughts, feelings and needs of the others. Saarni (1999) completes this cognitive aspect with the importance of emotional skills: the ability to use emotional language and cope with distressing emotions. The definitions of social competence suggest that it is indispensable a multidimensional interpretaion of the concept.

2.2. Elements of Social Competence Reflected by Different Theoretical Approaches

The four principal directions of social competence modelling are: (1) the social learning theory, (2) the cognitive perpective, (3) the affective approach, (4) and the integrative model, which, being the most appreciated perspective of our days, also recognizes the previous three ones.

Albert Bandura (2003) emphasises the role of imitation in a model-based behaviour in the matter of *social learning. The cognitive direction* consider the cognitive processes and structures the most significant in the acquisition of skills, the researchers with this perspective gain significance to the social problem solving thinking (Spivack and Shure, 1976), or to social processing of information (Crick and Dodge, 1994), nevertheless to the inductive thinking (Mott and Krane, 2006). *The affective perspective* enumerates as significant components of social competence the skills of expressing feelings, of accepting others and self-endorsement (Rinn and Markle, 1979). The socio-emotional model of Denham, Halberstadt és Dunsmore (2001) shows a close correlation with cognitive processes as well: the socially competent individual is able to pay attention to himself and others, he controls and externalizes his feelings, communicates effectively, is able to interpret others' emotional messages and reacts to them properly. In the light of *the integrative perspective,* social competence is a complex system, well explained in Nagy 's (2007, 2010) hierarchic model of components. The integrative approach defines social competence as „the system of social motifs and social skills, the organizer and realizer of social behaviour" (Nagy and Zsolnai, 2001, 252.). In the view of Nagy (2010) social competence is made up by four partial competences: the key competence of co-living, the social communicative competence, prosocial competence and the competence of endorsing interests.

Based on the components presented in theoretical models, we operationalized the social competence of preschoolers along three factors: the development of social skills and aptitudes, coping mechanisms used in peer conflicts, and social effectiveness represented by the sociometric status of the child.

Because one of the objectives of the study it is to find interrelations between the components of the social competence, we will present shortly some researches in order to be able to interpret the social competence in an integrative, multidimensional way,

Researches on coping mechanisms most of the time measure specific emotions in relation to coping mechanisms in general situations of stress or crisis, these mechanisms do not correspond entirely with coping alternatives used in social situations. However, their results help us in understanding the correlations between coping skills and social competence. Research has proved that active problem solving meant to be an adaptive coping, on the other hand, avoidance correlates with anxiety and depression, and it has proven to be a maladaptive technique. Although researchers have found a positive relation between support in seeking and anxiety in later childhood [6], asking for help, it is considered an adaptive method for coping with stress in preschool [7]. Externalizing, aggression is mostly associated with anger [6]. The results referring to the other factors are not relevant to this study. In specific interpersonal situations it is common to assess 7 types of coping skills in kindergarten children [1]: negotiation, avoidance, emotional response, resistance, physical aggression, support seeking and offering support. Research on children's social behavior very frequently highlights the two negative poles: aggression and withdrawal, which are considered maladaptive forms of coping. Zsolnai et al. categorizes strategies as being prosocial or aggressive. They rank support seeking, support offering, negotiation and avoidance as being prosocial, on the other hand resistance, emotional ventilation and physical aggression as being mechanisms which include aggression in general.

2.3. Characteristics of Social Competence Indicators in Preschoolers

Preschool is a sensitive stage in the development of social skills, due to the biological, psychological and social maturation of children and the microenvironment of the kindergarten. For an effective prevention we need to know in which age group the suitability for some social skills grows the most. This period of change is at the most sensitive time for development, and the best time to notice, prevent and meliorate problems.

The age of preschooler' is most often divided in three groups: 3-4, 4-5, 5-7 years. The present paper refers to these these age-groups to define differences in age specific social development. The social competence, as system of various components, becomes more and more effective in the course of the preschool period, because as the child advances in age he will become more and more capable of considering another person's point of view (Piaget, 1983), of controlling his emotions (Saarni, 1999), of verbal expression of his feelings (Izard et al., 2001), to cooperate in play (Mérei, 2006). By the end of the preschool time, till the age of 8 at least, the child is supposed to own these capacities, than he will be able to understand and to adapt to the rules of school and social life. These skills and abilities, all parts of social competence, have their basement on a neuropsychological development, but are strongly influenced by the micro-social environment as well.

According to a research which comprises some Hungarian and Italian results (Zsolnai et al., 2008) together with age the frequency of opposition and negotiation grows. Asking for support demonstrates contradicting results: according to the Hungarian research the frequency of *support seeking* decreases with age, whereas Italian results show that it grows, but only in cases when the observed child gets into situations of frustration. In contrast, in situations when a peer gets into conflict, the frequency of support seeking grows in the case of Hungarian children, and the frequency of offering support decreases with age. As far as physical aggression is concerned in the case of preschoolers belonging to the two different nations, researchers have come up with contradicting results again: the frequency of physical aggression grows with age in the case of Hungarian children whereas Italian children show more aggression in younger age groups. It is necessary to mention that in the research presented above showed results of a longitudinal research of 3 years long.

Peer relations are also important because some behavioral mechanisms will be reinforced due to acceptance or *rejection,* and the child will learn how to be effective in a dynamic *group* [4]. Children with a better social competence have greater popularity in the peer group, as it has been revealed by sociometric tests (Zhang et al., 2014). According to the findings, aggressive children often encounter rejection from their peers' part (Gower et al., 2014). Being accepted by others can later be associated with mental health and academic achievement (Hartup et al., 2002), as it has also been proved about social competence in so many researches.

2.4. Gender Differences in Children's Social Behaviour

From a demographic point of view we also have to take into consideration the gender of the child in the social development of preschoolers. We can read many researches on the differences between the social competences of boys and girls, and even more on inequalities in academic performance later on. Some researches certify that there are differences in social behavior between genders (McDowel and Parke, 2005), whereas others think that all these are only the result of differences in social demands, consequently differences in socialization (Matud, 2004). Some researchers show significant differences in the way we interpret these social manifestations (Duffy, 2011).

Regarding to gender, differences in social behaviour and the relating emotional and motivational differences show alterations on the level of prosocial behaviour between boys and girls. Researches on both children and adults have proved that girls are much more willing to offer help and they manifest emotions much more frequently (Zsolnai et al., 2008). Among the negative social interactions of girls the most characteristic one is passive coping which leads to anxiety or indirect verbal aggression (Fiske, 2004). Boys apply active strategies more often for problem solving on the positive pole. From maladaptive mechanisms physical aggression is much more characteristic to them. According to results of Zsolnai avoidance showed differences only in the case of the youngest girls, whereas physical aggression was more frequent in the behaviour of older boys than that of girls.

Parke and McDowel (2005) points out that boys and girls gain different feedback from peers according to their interpersonal coping: as in the social interaction of girls there are more prosocial elements and boys use aggression more frequently, girls gain popularity much more often and boys face rejection more often. Feedback is very important in forming social skills, it strengthens the tendency for repeating the same behaviour.

We consider it necessary to study differences of age group and gender on social competence and interpersonal coping, even though earlier studies have already dealt with these considerations. The various differences between cultures (Zsolnia et al. 2008), population and methods of research can lead to interesting results.

3. Socialization in the family

3.1. In the first subchapter it is presented the family, as the primary agent of socialization and its relation with other major types of socializing agencies. Next chapters are more important to be presented in details.

3.2. Sociological Theories of Family Socialization

This chapter endeavours to present how children's skills, competences, attitudes are shaped in a socioeconomically and culturally defined family environment. There are differences in theories and their interpretations on the role of children in the acceptance of socialization effects.

In the initial phase of *functionalism* they believe that norms, values, the social order and community has a determining effects on the social development of the child, but later functionalist authors confer a greater importance to the child's individual acting power.

The interactionalist perspective approaches the child in correlation with his environment. The subjective understanding of the situation can define the character of interaction and the alternatives for action, but this understanding has antecedents in the social mechanism, relation of forces, culture and language, as well as in the personality and life of those who take part in the interaction.

Capital theories characterize the relation between the structure and the agent in reciprocity, but they speak about social mobility only hypothetically, due to the fact that the inherited capital enforces the inequality in chances. This process cannot be stopped by institutional education either, what is more it enforces it implicitly by its own system of values. Bourdieu (2010) interprets the emergence of the child as the result of a family investment, where the child does not only have access to economic and cultural relational resources, but he also learns the related patterns and strategies.   In Coleman's (1990) view a change between capitals can happen between the human capital (knowledge, skills and competences) and the social capital (interpersonal relations) the most easily. This leads to the necessity of studying children's social competences in the light of their parents' social resources.

In our research we did not create a hierarchy in the importance of economic, cultural/human and social capitals affecting a child's social development, we would like to draw conclusions only referring to the results of our research. It is also not preferable to use the term "capital" in the thesis, while Angelusz and Tardusz (2006) justify that the term capital emphasizes the investment

and capital growth, not the access to capitals. The thesis has the focus on the child's access to the family resources, that's why we are most likely to refer to resources.

The theories of social stratification discuss that socialization is depending on the occupation and social status of parents – the educational values, habits, the language codes and behavioral forms, coping styles and conflict solving procedures are all related the economical activity of the parents. The SES variables – parental education, economic activity and financial background – are important indicators of our thesis, but without supporting their primordiality. According to the ecological model the context contains culture, economy, time, relations, functions on different levels. The present study also follows the influence of microsocial factors in correlation between material and immaterial factors.

Late modern and postmodern approaches characterize the socialization of the century by freedom, alternativeness and autonomy, but than there is also a growth in responsibility and insecurity which come together stress of adaptation, and it can becomes a risk factor. In this context communication skills, initiative, confrontation and flexibility are the factors that ensure social status and success, and not compliance with inherited social values anymore.

In the context of changed conditions, there is a need for innovation in research methodology as well -   the present study endeavours to live up to this modern expectation. This is how we proceeded: we did not separate the behavior of a kindergarten child from the dimensions affecting adult life, like ethnic group, gender, class etc., we study the child in the context of his age group and not compared to the competences of adults. Methodologically, the thesis is characterized by interdisciplinarity and variate perspectives: the teacher, the parent, the peer, and the assessed child itself will be evaluator.

Although each theory speaks about a strong influence of the microsocial environment, from all our concluding ideas we would like to emphasize the chances for mobility and success due to social competences, which underlines the importance of researching and developing it.

3.3. Protective Factors and Risk Factors that Affect Children's Social Development

The elements of the microsocial environment are mostly operated according to two groups of variables: the material dimension, embracing the income, education level and the housing conditions, and the prosocial dimension according as the family is described by cohesion and the impact of relations or their disorder.

The microsocial factors can be manifested as risk or as safety factors (Danis et al., 2011). These factors doesn't always have positive or negative consequences, certain protective factors are exerted only among one particular risk, or there are other types of risks which cause unfavorable outcome only in case they are accumulated.

Previous studies establish the grounds of the factors that can be relied upon by positive or negative influence. For example Aszmann (2003) enumerates indicators that are connected to well-being as follows: the socioeconomic well-being of the family, the educational values of the parents, time-management of the family, the social relationships of the family, the health of the family and their subjective well-being: the satisfaction with the standard of living.

In the thesis, the familial background factors were operationalized according to similar factors.

4. Methodology of Research

The chapter presents the research question of the research, the hypothesis, an illustrative figure of the research processes and a detailed description of the sampling. A longer subchapter is dedicated to the methods of the research. In the abstract we will focus on the hypothesis, the datas of the sample and the methods.

4.2. Hypothesis

Research question is how the different indicators of social competence are intrerrelated and wether these items are related to gender, age and the to the family's sociodemografic situation. In order to answer yhes questions, four hypotheses were tested based on previous findings

H(1) The first hypothesis assumes a strong interrelation between the three indicators of social competence. We assumed that children with a higher social competence will apply coping strategies which were proved to be adaptive by previous researches, like negotiation, support seeking, offering help in peer situations. Contrarily, children with a lower score in social competence will apply aggression, avoidance and emotional ventilation more often. According to our hypothesis, a child's social competence level correlates positively with peer acceptance. We also assume that those children who apply aggression in situations of conflict are often rejected by their peers as a result of sociometric ratings. Contrarily, we assume that children applying prosocial strategies have greater popularity among their peers.

H (2) The second hypothesis assumes a change according to ages in the application of the social skills. We assume, that coping methods which require verbalism and cooperation increase with age during preschool – these are: negotiation, opposition, seeking for support and offering support. The number of passive and emotional reactions decreases with age, these being: avoidance, aggression and emotional ventilation.

H (3) The hypotheses regarding the gender differences in social behavior was tested in the following subparagraphs: **g**irls and boys apply different coping strategies in situations of conflict, girls are supposed to be more emotional and passive, boys are supposed to use active problemsoliving and agression more often; the social competence of girls` are evaluated to be higher than boys` social competence level; girls gain more likability in their own peer group.

H (4) We assume that the family resources with socioeconomic and psychosocial character have a measurable contribution early in preschool on the development of social competencies, while other factors have been proved a source of danger in the development of social skills and abilities. Based on the literature it is expected a positive outcome regarding the socio-cultural factors, the educational background of the parents, the active position on the labor market, and a basic material condition. The social-emotional factors – the family cohesion, the balance in the relationships, the social support of the parents, the religious-spiritual commitment, and the life-satisfaction. Our hypothesis will be considered justified if the above-listed family background factors are predictive on at least one indicator of social competence. The absence of these above-listed factors – poverty, low education, unemployment, lack of co-support and the help of others, deprivation, conflicts, life events crises, illnesses, dissatisfaction - are believed to restrain the development of social skills and abilities. The children in need of the appropriate conditions will apply less effective coping strategies and their social competencies will be evaluated low, by both, the adults, and the peers.

4.4. Participants

The sampling was following a stratification on the criteria of the socioeconomic status of the family. We obtained measures about 536 preschool children. All children attend Hungarian groups in a Romanian, urban, state kindergarten. There are 280 boys and 257 girls in the sample. 49% of the children are 5-7, 28% are 4-5, and 23% are 3-4 years old. Due to the frequent absence

of the children from the kindergarten, we could not apply all the research methods to each individual child. We collected answers about the preschoolers' social competence from 446 teachers and parents. 459 teachers completed the questionnaire about children's coping skills and we got self-evaluation data about coping strategies from 360 children. 196 children were rated with sociometry.

4.5. Methods

The chapter first presents the methods of measuring the indicators of social competence: the coping mechanisms, the development of social skills, and the sociometric status. Int he fourth subchapter it is presented the method of collecting data about family background of the children, including the factors of socio-economic status, the household structure, and psihosocial factors like stress indicators, social and spiritual resources, time-management of the family, educational values and subjective well-being of the parents.

4.5.1. Assesment of Interpersonal Coping skills

The questionnaire about coping strategies measures the functioning of emotional and social skills in negative social situations of frustration. We used measuring tool developed by Zsolnai et al (2007). It is applied to children and teachers as well. The questionnaire included nine social situations in kindergarten, where seven questions refered to situations when the assessed child himself gets into conflicting situations. Another two questions demand answers on what he does when one of his peers encounters obstacles. Zsolnai et al. (2007) consider, that these two situations are characterized by different behavioral forms, thus the answers should be interpreted separately according to the type of situation.

Adults completed the questionnaire individually, indicating only one answer from the enlisted ones. Children were asked by a research assistant and answers were indicated according to the children's choice of the corresponding options. Each answer corresponds to one coping reaction: (1) Support seeking; (2) Negotiation; (3) Resistance; Avoidance; (5) Physical aggression; (6) Emotional response. In situations referring to peer the coping mechanism of support offering (7) will become part of the assessment as well.

Social competence of children was measured with Cognitrom PedA Social Competence Screening for Preschoolers - Parent form (SCS-P) and Teacher Form (SCS-T) (Miclea et al., 2012). We adapted the screening to Hungarian, the details of adaptaion are described int he dissertation.

The questionnaire assesses three subscales, which are: compliance to rules, interpersonal skills and prosocial behavior. It inquires the frequency of a specific behavior on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=almost never and 5=almost always. The varieties of the questionnaire were compiled for three age groups: 3-4, 4-5, 5-7, for parents and teachers separately. The reliability indicators are high on all levels: Cronbach-alpha is above 0.7 for each group.

III. Sociometric assessment was based on the method of Denham et al. (1990) for kindergarten children. Children could assess their peers with the help of symbols: ☺ ☹ ☺, which meant: "I like him, I like playing with him." / "I don't like him, I don't like playing with him." /"I like him and I don't at the same time." Further, we will name the smiley as a positive nomination, the sad face as a negative nomination and the emoticon with the straight mouth as a neutral nomination.

4.5.4. Assessment of Home Environment Factors

Parents were asked about their living conditions, social demographic situation and lifestyle so as to be able to reveal some predictive variables of childrens' social competence.

The Family background questionnaire collects information on the following aspects:
- Information about the child
- Socio- demographic data of parents
- Education of the parents
- Qualification of parents, their occupation and work
- Financial situation, dwelling conditions
- Time management of children and parents
- Questions about the lifestyle of the child and some educational habits of parents
- Family conflicts, crisis
- Health condition
- social relations, religiousness

- Satisfaction with the child`s cognitive/emotional/physical developement and life satisfaction

Informations about the childrens' familial environment were asked from parent who voluntary gave their phone number/e-mail address when they answered the Social Competence Questionnaire beforehand, so that we could continue our research. They completed the questionnaire online or on paper. *The online questionnaire* was made in the special questionnaire-editor programme on the site of the university, and we asked the parents to complete it via e-mail. Those parents who did not have the possibility to complete the questionnaire online, or had either no writing skills or problems with reading comprehension, did it *on paper* while a discussion on the topic. The researcher was/is obliged to deal with all the information confidentially and the parent always had the possibility to refuse to answer any question.

5. Results

The result were presented in order to test the hypothesis. Chapter 5.1 (Results Referring to the Indicators of Social Competence) and chapter 5.5. (Features of Family Background of Preschool Children from the Sample, according to the Questionnaire Given to Parents) served a the analyze of indicators, for a better interpretation of the results, it is not necessary to present them in the abstract. Although it is important to know, that in these two chapters we used statistical methods, like cluster analyses and factorial analyses to reduce variables, and to find better interpretation of the assessed indicators.

5.2. Results reffering to the relations between the indicators of social competence

Results certified the first part of our hypothesis. Those coping mechanisms that have been considered adaptive ones in preschool, like support seeking, negotiation, offering help in peer-situations change together with the development of social competence. Opposing to this, the deficiencies of social competence go together with aggression in self-centered situations and avoidance in peer situation, both being objects of various researches on social competence. Aggression is studied as an external, while avoidance as an internal problem of behaviour. Emotional ventilation correlates negatively with social competence in certain conditions, but the relation is very weak.

The relation between social competence and sociometric assessment - has also been proven: the positive appreciation of peers grows together with the development of social competence, while deficiencies in social competence cause the refusal of the child by his peers.

As a third point, we examined the relation between sociometric appreciation and coping mechanisms, where our hypothesis has only partially been proven: the frequent use of physical maltreatment causes refusal by peers; the child, who shows the willingness to offer support, gets the least negative appreciation from his peers; as far as coping by negotiation is concerned, the findings are controversial: its effectiveness has been proven by the assessment of teachers, who say that negotiation leads to a decrease in refusal, but opposing to this, those children who consider themselves negotiators, are appreciated negatively by their peers; avoidance, emotional ventilation and coping by support seeking do not modify the assessment of peers.

As a sum-up, we can say that the adults' assessment on competence has been affirmed by the sociometric assessment of children. As far as coping mechanisms are concerned, - in consensus with the literature of speciality – we found out which are the ones that lead to social emergence, and which do not. Seeking for help, offering help and negotiation have proved to be effective strategies. The findings obtained about negotiation do not correlate with the self-assessment of children and negative sociometric assessments, but later they become clear due to demographic factors. Aggression proved to be the least effective strategy in self-centered situations, while avoidance in peer situations.

5.3.Results referring to differences in social competence according to age groups

Our findings proved that there is a significant difference between each age group in kindergarten and their preferences in coping mechanisms. The following results certify a part of the hypothesis: negotiation and resistance is characteristic for older children; emotional response and avoidance are both frequent reactions in the case of younger children.

Contradictory results to our primary hypothesis were also revealed. Support seeking is characteristic for older preschoolers, they apply it after the age of 4-5. As far as offering help and physical maltreatment are concerned, there aren't significant differences between age groups, their frequency does not depend on age in kindergarten years. The last result is surprising because these two forms of coping are situated on the two opposite poles of social interactions, as prosocial and

antisocial behavioral patterns, that is the reason why we expected a greater detachment between them.

In teachers' assessment the differences between age groups are much more vividly differentiated, than in children's self-assessment. It is evident though, that those mechanisms, which require verbal communication with peers or teachers, are much more frequent in older age groups. While asking the adult for help is frequent at the age of 4-5 already, verbal mechanisms used in confrontations with peers are applied only later, in groups of older kindergarten children. Passive, non confrontational mechanisms are less and less frequent towards the end of kindergarten time. Among these, the use of avoidance is significantly less frequent by the age of 4-5 already. Therefore we can conclude that the number of proactive behavioural forms grows together with age between 3 and 7.

In our sample the sociometric results did not show a more significat social effectiveness in older age groups.

5.4. Results referring to Gender Differences in the Social Behaviour of Preschool Children

Our findings revealed that there are significant differences between girls and boys in the matter of social behavior, or at least in its ratings.

We studied seven forms of coping. Our expectations have been confirmed for six coping mechanisms, and we got contradictory results in the case of one. Girls are more likely to ask for help and respond with emotional ventilation and verbal resistance to social frustration. Boys are more likely to use physical aggression if they encounter interpersonal conflicts. In peer situations girls show greater inclination to help, but they still use emotional reactions very frequently. In peer situations boys are more likely to show avoidant behavioural forms than girls, which is in contradiction with our presumption.

We encountered the most obvious difference in the matter of physical aggression in self-centered situations, and avoidant behavioral forms in peer situations, due to the responses provided by both assessors which said that boys are more likely to use these coping mechanisms than girls. The literature of specialty denotes both behavioral forms as maladaptive strategies (Zhang and his partners, 2014; Vierhaus and Lohaus, 2009), that is why we can ask the question if boys face greater risks along the development of their social skills. Even if we assess the matter from more

points of view, thus subjectivity being reduced alongside with the possibility of torsional effects, our results do not show the extent to which these indicate social behavior or they reflect the viewpoint of the assessor, nor their interference; but the differences are nonetheless worth to be considered.

The second aspect of our hypothesis, referring to gender differences, has been unanimously proved: teachers, as well as parents stated that the social competence of girls is more developed than that of boys. Our findings are unanimous in the sense that maladaptive strategies, like aggression and avoidance are characteristic for boys, while prosocial behavioural forms, like support seeking and offering help are characteristic for girls. The latter are positively appreciated in the literature of specialty as well (Vahedi, 2012). The mechanisms used by girls contain more verbal and non-verbal messages, which determine the adult or peer to respond: they ask for help, they offer help or they start to cry in difficult situations. Boys' responses are less cooperative: they are more avoidant – they do not take into consideration the reaction of their peer, or they are more aggressive causing the impotence of their peer or the adult in the given situation, thus being more likely to gain negative nominations.

We certified the third point of our hypothesis with the help of sociometric assessment: girls get more positive nominations than boys, from children as well. Researchers explain this fact with the correlation between the behaviour of children and the attitude of their peers (Duffy, 2010; Parke and McDowel, 2005; Denham, 1990): as there are more prosocial elements in girls' behaviour and there are more aggressive ones in boys' behaviour, girls encounter greater popularity and boys are more likely to encounter refusal. The feedback they get strengthens the tendency to repeat such behavioural forms, thus the appreciation they receive having a direct impact on their actions.

Our findings draw attention to the fact that girls use such social coping mechanisms, which are targeted to another person more often than boys, therefore gaining more positive feedback already in kindergarten, this giving them further opportunities in their emergence in social situations, as well as in school years in the long run. This is due to the fact that school favourizes the behavioural forms that are mainly characteristic of girls. The facts that there are much more boys among early school leavers than girls, and there are more teenager boys with antisocial behaviour than girls, are indubitably clear consequences of this problem. (Meichenbaum, 2006).

5.6. Results referring to relationship between the indicators of social competence and background family factors

The family background variables have an undisputed effect on the development and aspects of social competence in preschoolers. In order to find the determinant factors on social competence, we used multiple regression analysis. We found 7 regression models to predict adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, the level of development of social competence and the sociometric status. The thesis present it in details, in the abstract we will only sum ap the protective and risk factors. The following sociodemografic, socioeconomical and psihosocial aspects have been proved to be resources for social competence development, and adaptive strategies: suitable financial conditions, the educational level of the father, the economical activity of parents. Among the socioemotional conditions we have to mention about the importance of the balanced atmosphere at home, with less conflicts, the satisfaction of the parent with the partner, and the child as well, good health of the mother and living in multigenerational family under certain conditions. Taking practice of coequal interactions in relationships with their siblings or taking part in extracurricular activities, both are serving the benefit of social competence. The absence of the enumerated factors does not have a beneficial effect on social competence indictors: unemployment, conflicts between parents and their dissatisfaction with their life, illnesses.

Variables referring to social support received in education, religious and spiritual commitment, the time management of adults and time spent together by parents and children confirmed our hypothesis only partially: we revealed a linear correlation, but their explanatory role could not be proved in this sample.

About the nature of parents' occupation and status we can say that in the multiple linear regression model only those parents were present who had an subaltern emloye position, despite the fact that we expected a more "characterful" presence in the case of leading positions and entrepreneurs. These variables have constantly been present among the relations of social competence, but they are not determinant on the social competence indicators. The work conducted in a subaltern or employee status does not have either a positive or a negative value, it indicates an adaptive behaviour in both cases: it predicts less physical aggression and it is in the favour of using support seeking in stressful situations. However, both of the results lack risk taking and confrontation. This is a very important result of our research, because it certifies that family

background factors can offer an explanation not only for development level, but also for many features of social competence.

6. Conclusions and future directions

Social competence is more than a skill in kindergarten or school; it is the primary condition for social wellbeing that is necessary for human relationships, work and social mobility in adulthood. Preschoolers are in such sensible developmental stages in which the effects of socialization can be embedded the most easily due to certain specific characteristics of this age. That is why it is very important that these developmental processes happen according to the child's needs, on a socially differentiated basis, but for these we need to be well informed both about the intrapersonal characteristics, and the social environment.

Our paper does not only present the socioeconomic variables of family background factors, which are so often dealt with, but it also dwells on material and nonmaterial, objective and subjective, economic and social indicators, which nonetheless contribute to the development of social competence. Although the literature of specialty concentrates mainly on SES indicators in the case of early development, in our sample we could not prove its primordiality, what is more, we found more social-emotional indicators among the explanatory variables. This can partially be justified with the fact that the majority of the examined children come from families with good social situation. Only very few come from radically poor families, which would be more suitable for us to be able to show the differences more clearly. Another explanation would be the novelty of correlations: we studied social competence very complexly, from various points of view, which are rarely the subject of sociological research. Social economic indicators have often been the only variables in the studies on the development of children so far. Our findings can also be formulated as a recommendation for further research on the early development of children. Results offer only a pattern for it, each of the revealed correlations deserve further study.

In the matter of family background variables, good financial situation, the parents' qualification and activity on the labour market among the economic-cultural aspects, while family cohesion, balance in the parents' relationship among the social emotional aspects led to positive results. The absence of the enlisted conditions – poverty, low schooling, unemployment, lack of support, conflicts and crisis, diseases, disappointment had a negative impact on the development of social competence.

Beyond the correlations we presumed, our research revealed other ones as well. One of the greatest assets of our research is that we revealed the indicators of social competence from various points of view, using various methods of research. This complex approach could shed light to certain torsions in assessment, which is a clear sign that the study of behavioral variables without reference to social demographic correlations might lead to misinterpretations. This finding supports the postmodern sociological concept according to which an up-to-date research cannot be realized without interdisciplinarity.

The research drew attention to numerous methodological conclusions. Thanks to the multi-variate evaluation and the examination of social-demographic background, we observed a number of measurement errors and distortions on which not have been possible to take note without complexe analisis. At the same time, we would like to underline the need for interdisciplinarity.

We recommend to add measurement of response style, particularly in the case of measuring with scales, to filter out the response distortions in the research. At the same time, it is needed to resolve the investigation of persons with low educational level, who have difficulty reading and writing, or they are using different verbal concepts, different than the language of the institutionalized education.

We have revealed a lot of correlations in the research, which serve as a great base to continue or to initiate new research. However, the biggest results are promised by a longitudinal research, which meets all the conditions with our database.

The existing findings of the present research display many prevention options. The long-term goal of the research is the creation of a prevention plan.

7. Originality and limits of the research

The originality of our research lies in the *choice of topic,* as we have already stated in the introduction.

We consider that a unique success of our research is *the creation of its own database,* the data can be processed in many ways in the future, for example they offer the possibility for longitudinal research as well.

The instrument for measuring social competence adapted to Hungarian is one of the practical results of our research, being usable in psycho-pedagogical cabinets already.

The methodological experience we obtained is one of the most important methodological profits of our research. In the measurement of social competences we applied three methods, which the specialist in our country have not been familiar with – at least not in application–, and measurements on Hungarian preschoolers in Romania have not been done before.

We had an innovative attitude in the methodology of research, which means that *we studied the indicators from various perspectives,* and we also asked the children about their attitudes. It was a real challenge to synchronize the various viewpoints in formulating our findings and processing our data, but it has become obvious in many situations that a change in viewpoints is necessary: this is how mistakes in measurement and torsion in answers can be discovered.

Despite the variety of means and viewpoints, a shortage of our research is the fact that *we did not offer a qualitative interpretation.* In the light of this shortage the thesis does not reflect the experience of the child and my own experience as a kindergarten teacher, but we hope that in the future we will manage to complete our thesis with the "most delicate" details.

Our findings have revealed a variety of new relations, which would deserve separate research each. We can say that one shortage of our research is that we interpreted these relations only superficially, on the other hand, a burden of our thesis is the fact that we tried to compile the general image from many small details and many coherences, trying to offer the clearest picture possible. Let us call it a synthetic image – we think that at this point of our research we managed to offer uniformity in the matter of processing the results, it needs further research and highlights the essence from bird view. But as the main goal of our thesis is to reveal the possibilities lying in new relation, we can safely say that the research was successful: it offers various prospects for new research and differentiated development.

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