

SELF-DIFFERENTIATION, RESILIENCE, DISSOCIATION, AND DEPRESSION AS PREDICTORS OF DIFFERENT FAMILY ROLES *¹

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Abstract

In order to facilitate family functioning children often assume different roles (e.g. hero, scapegoat, mascot, lost child). The role that a specific child will assume is determined both by the characteristics of the family system and his/her personal characteristics. The aim of this research was to examine the relations between different family roles (hero, scapegoat, mascot, lost child) and dimensions of self-differentiation (emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cutoff, fusion), resilience, dissociation, and depression. The sample consisted of 179 students of psychology and social work and social policy, aged 18 to 25 years ($M = 20.09$; $SD = 1.64$). The following instruments were used: Children's Roles Inventory (CRI), Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), Stress Related Dissociation-10 (SRD-10), Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). Results of regression analysis showed that fusion was the only statistically significant predictor of family role hero ($\beta = -.238$, $p = .004$; $R^2 = .137$, $F(4, 144) = 5.73$, $p < .001$). Significant predictors of family role scapegoat were emotional cut-off ($\beta = -.333$, $p = .000$) and dissociation ($\beta = .229$; $p = .048$; $R^2 = .188$, $F(4, 144) = 8.326$, $p < .001$). Emotional cut-off ($\beta = .180$, $p = .026$), and resilience ($\beta = .210$, $p = .035$) were statistically significant predictors of family role mascot ($R^2 = .188$, $F(3, 145) = 8.326$, $p = .002$). The emotional cut-off was the only statistically significant predictor of the family role the lost child ($\beta = -.470$, $p = .000$; $R^2 = .254$, $F(4, 144) = 12.286$, $p < .001$). Results indicate that dimensions of self-differentiation have an important role in assuming certain family roles. Higher scores of emotional cutoff play an important role in assuming less functional roles (role of the scapegoat and the lost child), while a lower level of emotional cutoff is a significant predictor of more functional role such as mascot. It is also showed that a higher level of fusion is predictive of family role hero. Dissociation is important in understanding assuming the role of a scapegoat, whereas resilience has a significant contribution in assuming the family role mascot. The results could have practical implications for psychotherapy, and a better understanding of family functioning.

Keywords: *Family roles (hero, scapegoat, mascot, lost child), self-differentiation, resilience, dissociation, depression.*

1. Introduction

The family can be perceived as a system in which all family members are interconnected, and the system itself can be viewed as the result of dynamic interaction among family members (Potter & Williams, 1991). Thus, the problem of one family member affects other members, but also the family as a whole. In an effort to maintain balance, the entire family system may become unhealthy, and family members could assume defensive patterns in order to survive. In order to facilitate family functioning, children often assume different roles. Black (1982; as cited in Potter & Williams, 1991) and Wegscheider (1981; as cited in Potter & Williams, 1991) theoretically indicated the roles that children could assume in dysfunctional families with alcoholism. A decade later, Potter and Williams (1991) created an instrument in order to empirically confirm these roles on a sample of adults. These roles are hero (guardian, responsible child), the scapegoat (problematic child, acting-out child), lost child (forgotten child/adjuster), and mascot (clown, family pet) (Potter & Williams, 1991; Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001). The hero obtains positive attention through achievement-oriented behavior (Samuel, Mahmood, & Saleem, 2014;

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Williams & Potter, 1994). These individuals are very successful in school or at work and put the needs of others before their own. Trying to achieve a certain level of control and stability within the family system, a child who assumes the role of hero may appear to others as competent and serious, while actually feeling weak and guilty inside (Veronie & Fruestorfer, 2001; Williams & Potter, 1994). Individuals who assume the role of scapegoat may seek attention through negative, confrontational, or defiant behaviors (Veronie & Fruestorfer, 2001; Williams & Potter, 1994). A child who assumes this role usually shows a preference for outside-family activities and is more influenced by the values of peer groups, whereby they often engage in antisocial, delinquent, destructive behaviors, dropping out of school (Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001; Potter & Williams, 1991). Individuals who take on the role of the lost child are usually isolated, neither successful nor weak in school, and often use imagination, drugs, or food as a form of escape (Potter & Williams, 1991; Scharff, Broida, Conway, & Yue, 2003; Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001). The mascot role is characterized by relying on humor when dealing with disturbing and unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or situations (Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001; Scharff et al., 2003).

Fischer and Wapler (1994; as cited in Samuel et al., 2014) placed the roles hero and the mascot in the “positive” category while the scapegoat and the lost child in the “negative” category. These two categories were determined by the extent to which these roles helped or hindered the normal functioning of the family.

Potter and Williams (1991) assumed that the effects of parental alcoholism on children’s emotional and behavioral functioning may follow them into adulthood, i.e. problems with low self-esteem and self-acceptance, trust, and control may continue after childhood and adolescence. Further, since they engage in behaviors consistent with their family role both inside and outside the home they tend to perpetuate their role into adulthood (Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001). In previous research (Potter & Williams, 1991) it is shown that these roles exist not only in families with the presence of parental alcoholism but in every family. According to our findings, only a few research was interesting in these family roles (Potter & Williams, 1991; Samuel et al., 2014; Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001; Williams & Potter, 1994), living this field of interest generally unresearched.

Relying on the descriptions of these family roles given in previous research (Potter & Williams, 1991; Samuel et al., 2014; Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001; Williams & Potter, 1994), we assumed that the inclusion of some of the individual characteristics, such as differentiation of self, depression, dissociation, and resilience, could significantly contribute to a better understanding of these roles.

Having in mind that the level of differentiation, as one of the most important concepts from Bowen’s theory of the family system, is primarily linked to family patterns of interaction (Chung & Gale, 2009), we assumed that it could be correlated with children’s family roles. Two levels of differentiation of self could be distinguished: intrapersonal and interpersonal (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). On the intrapersonal level differentiation of self refers to the ability to distinguish between feelings and thoughts, and balance between emotional and intellectual functioning. On the interpersonal level indicate the ability to experience closeness with others, without the loss of autonomy of own self. Four indicators of the level of differentiation of an individual have been adopted: the ability to take an I position, emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Poorly differentiated persons tend to be more emotionally reactive, thus in response to the emotionality of others they have difficulties to remain calm. More differentiated individuals are capable of taking an I position in relationships with keeping a clearly defined sense of self. Highly fused individuals remain emotionally “stuck” in the position they occupied in their families of origin, have few firmly held convictions and beliefs, are either dogmatic or compliant and seek acceptance and approval above all other goals. The emotional cutoff is personified by the reactive emotional distancer, who appears isolated from others, tends to deny the importance of family, and displays an exaggerated facade of independence. Fused person tends to experience separation as overwhelming, while the emotionally cutoff person finds intimacy threatening. Both individuals are poorly differentiated, whereby their self-esteem is based on the approval of others.

Since it has been shown that some children faced with problematic family circumstances withdraw into themselves, tend to fantasize, escape through food, and drugs, or develop certain psychological difficulties we included depression and dissociation (Potter & Williams, 1991; Scharff et al., 2003; Veronie & Fruestorfer, 2001; Williams & Potter, 1994). Depressive disorders are defined by gloomy feelings, loss of interest and energy, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, not enjoying anything (Lim et al., 2018). It is usually accompanied by physical symptoms, poor and insufficient sleep, poor appetite, low self-esteem, and low global satisfaction with life. Dissociation is a complex psychophysiological process that alters the accessibility of memory and knowledge, integration of behavior, and sense of self (Carlson, Yates, & Sroufe, 2009). Dissociative processes may manifest as disturbances of affect regulation (e.g., mood swings, feelings of isolation), identity disruptions (e.g., splitting, fragmentation), autohypnotic phenomena (e.g., time distortions, psychogenic numbing),

memory dysfunction (e.g., psychogenic amnesia, fugue), revivification of traumatic experience (e.g., flashbacks, hallucinations), and behavioral disturbance (e.g., inattention, poor impulse control, self-harm).

Considering that some children faced with problematic family circumstances take on roles that lead to functional solutions, such as the role of hero or mascot (Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001; Scharff et al., 2003), we hypothesized that resilience could contribute to a better understanding of some of the roles that children assume. Resilience refers to viewing changes as challenges, developing a strategy with a clear goal, action orientation behavior, strong self-esteem/confidence, adaptability when coping with change, humor in the face of stress, taking on responsibilities for dealing with stress, security/stable affectional bonds, commitment, faith (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

2. Objectives

The aim of this research was to examine the relations between different family roles (hero, scapegoat, mascot, lost child) and dimensions of self-differentiation (emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cutoff, fusion), resilience, dissociation, and depression. More precisely, we were interested in the predictive value of dimensions of self-differentiation (emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cutoff, fusion), resilience, dissociation, and depression in relation to different family roles (hero, scapegoat, mascot, lost child).

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

The research sample consists of 149 students of psychology and social work and social policy at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia, aged 18 to 25 ($M = 20.09$, $SD = 1.64$). Out of the total number, 88 respondents come from a complete family, 28 from an incomplete family, and 29 from an extended family. When it comes to the partnership status of the parents, 115 respondents indicated that their parents were married, 23 were divorced, and 6 marked the answer "other".

3.2. Variables and instruments

Children's Roles were measured with the Children's Roles Inventory (CRI; Potter & Williams, 1991) which consists of 60 items divided across four subscales – hero ("When I was a child I was an achiever."; $\alpha = .860$), scapegoat ("When I was a child I was aggravating"; $\alpha = .858$), lost child ("When I was a child I was depressed."; $\alpha = .868$), and mascot ("When I was a child I was animated"; $\alpha = .739$). The scale is rated on a five-point Likert scale. Although the scale was called Children's Role Inventory, it was intended for adults participants (Potter & Williams, 1991).

Self-differentiation was measured with Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) that has 43 items with four subscales: emotional reactivity ("People have remarked that I'm overly emotional"; $\alpha = .753$), I position ("I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress."; $\alpha = .786$), emotional cutoff ("I have difficulty expressing my feelings to people I care for"; $\alpha = .752$), and fusion with others ("I worry about people close to me getting sick, hurt, or upset"; $\alpha = .612$). The scale is rated on a six-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater differentiation.

Depression was measured with the scale Patient Health Questionnaire - 9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001). The scale consisted of nine questions with possible answers from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day) ("In the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems: weak interest or satisfaction to do something"; $\alpha = .850$).

Dissociation was measured with Stress-Related Dissociation – 10 (SRD-10; Knežević & Jović, 2004). This scale contains 10 questions with possible answers from 1 (not at all) to 5 (nearly every day) ("People tell me I'm distracted."; $\alpha = .846$).

Resilience was measured with Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davison, 2003). The scale contains 25 items with possible answers from 0 (nearly never true) to 4 (nearly always true) ("I have a feeling that I have control over my life"; $\alpha = .862$).

4. Results

Descriptive statistics of measured variables were presented in Table 1, and then results of correlation (Table 2) and regression analysis were given.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the of measured variables.

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Sk	Ku
Hero	149	2.47	5.00	3.83	0.59	-0.228	-0.722
Scapegoat	149	1.00	3.80	1.91	0.60	0.649	-0.063
Mascot	149	2.20	4.67	3.60	0.50	-0.405	-0.056
Lost child	149	1.00	4.73	2.53	0.74	0.424	-0.118
Emotional reactivity	149	1.40	6.00	3.09	0.88	0.634	0.623
I position	149	2.18	6.00	4.27	0.80	-0.182	-0.669
Emotional cut off	149	2.00	6.00	4.41	0.85	-0.453	-0.141
Fusion	149	1.00	5.50	2.71	0.80	0.707	1.071
Resilience	149	1.52	3.92	2.87	0.49	-0.413	-0.165
Depression	149	0.00	2.78	0.95	0.6	0.872	0.104
Dissociation	149	1.00	4.60	1.85	0.75	1.001	0.564

Table 2. Correlation between variables.

	Emotional reactivity	I position	Emotional cutoff	Fusion	Resilience	Depression	Dissociation
Hero	-.059	.209*	.117	-.175*	.287**	-.109	-.169*
Scapegoat	.008	-.169*	-.375**	.016	-.087	.220**	.294**
Mascot	.101	.163*	.212**	-.096	.254**	-.098	-.114
Lost child	-.150	-.083	-.494**	.018	-.171*	.248**	.231**

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

The results showed that family role hero is in positive correlation with I position and resilience, and in negative correlation with fusion and dissociation. Family role scapegoat is in negative correlation with I position and emotional cutoff, and in positive correlation with depression and dissociation. The mascot was in positive correlation with I position, emotional cutoff, and resilience. The lost child was in a negative correlation with emotional cutoff and resilience, and in a positive correlation with depression and dissociation.

Results of regression analysis showed that fusion was the only statistically significant predictor of family role hero ($\beta = -.238$, $p = .004$; $R^2 = .137$, $F(4, 144) = 5.73$, $p < .001$). Significant predictors of family role scapegoat were emotional cutoff ($\beta = -.333$, $p = .000$) and dissociation ($\beta = .229$; $p = .048$; $R^2 = .188$, $F(4, 144) = 8.326$, $p < .001$). Emotional cutoff ($\beta = .180$, $p = .026$), and resilience ($\beta = .210$, $p = .035$) were statistically significant predictors of family role mascot ($R^2 = .188$, $F(3, 145) = 8.326$, $p = .002$). The emotional cutoff was the only statistically significant predictor of the family role of the lost child ($\beta = -.470$, $p = .000$; $R^2 = .254$, $F(4, 144) = 12.286$, $p < .001$).

5. Discussion

In this research, we were interested in relations between different family roles (hero, scapegoat, mascot, lost child) and dimensions of self-differentiation (emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cut-off, fusion), resilience, dissociation, and depression.

The results showed that fusion was the only statistically significant predictor of family role hero in a way that a higher level of fusion is correlated with a higher probability that a person will assume this family role. Just to remember, in accordance with instructions given for scale DSI, higher scores of dimensions of emotional reactivity, I position, fusion, and emotional cutoff refer to a higher level of differentiation. This result is not so surprising having in mind that although the hero is usually seen as the one who is achiever, the successful one, inside themselves they feel weak and guilty (Veronie & Fruensterfer, 2001; Williams & Potter, 1994). According to obtained results, we could say that persons who assume the family role hero are somewhat poorly differentiated, i.e. fused (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). When it comes to family role mascot statistically significant predictors were emotional cutoff (in a negative direction) and resilience (in a positive direction). In line with obtained results, we could say that an individual who assumed this family role is more self-differentiated and resilient. The emotional cutoff was the only statistically significant predictor (in a negative direction) of the family role lost child, while emotional cutoff (in a negative direction) and dissociation (in a positive direction) were statistically significant predictors of family role scapegoat. It could be said that persons who assumed family roles lost

child or scapegoat have a tendency to emotionally distance themselves from family and deny its importance, appear aloof and isolated from others. The results are as expected referring to previous findings of these family roles (Williams & Potter, 1994). Individuals who assume the role of the scapegoat usually show a tendency to outside-familial activities, and are more influenced by the values of peer groups, engaging more often in antisocial, delinquent, destructive behaviors, while individuals who assume the role of the lost child are usually isolated (Potter & Williams, 1991; Scharff et al., 2003; Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001). It showed that dissociation as a complex psychophysiological process that alters the accessibility of memory and knowledge, integration of behavior, and sense of self (Carlson et al., 2009) is of important in better understanding the family role scapegoat.

6. Conclusion

Results indicate that some dimensions of self-differentiation have an important role in assuming certain family roles. Higher scores of emotional cutoff play an important role in assuming less functional roles (role of the scapegoat and the lost child), while a lower level of emotional cutoff is a significant predictor of more functional roles such as mascot. It is also shown that a higher level of fusion is predictive of a family role hero. Dissociation is an important factor in understanding assuming the role of a scapegoat, whereas resilience has a significant contribution in assuming the family role mascot. The results could have practical implications for psychotherapy, and a better understanding of family functioning.

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