„Wychowanie w Rodzinie" t. XV (1/2017)

Ondřej SEKERA[*]

Self-preservation positions in family communications: parent – child interaction

Samozachowanie pozycji komunikacyjnej w interakcjach rodzic – dziecko

Abstract

This paper describes the part of results of research into family communications. Our two years' investigation was targeted at communication between parents and children. The focus was on so called "Satir Models" of self-preservation positions taken by parents in family communications most frequently. The data come from authentic recordings of common communications in families related to specific situations (for example, children getting ready for a day at school, during art and craft activities, sitting at the table, etc.). Our aim is to describe and analyse concrete examples of family communications used by parents in the child directed speech to fulfil the self-preservation strategies.

Keywords: self-preservation position, parent – child interaction, communication functions in language, congruence, incongruence.

Streszczenie

W artykule opisano wyniki badań w dziedzinie komunikacji rodzinnej. Dwuletnie badania ukierunkowane były na komunikację między rodzicami i dziećmi. Skupiono się na tak zwanych „modelach" Satir – ukazujących postawy samozachowawcze, najczę-

[*] e-mail: ondrej.sekera@osu.cz
Ostravská univerzita v Ostravě, Pedagogická fakulta, katedra sociální pedagogiky, Fr. Šrámka 3, Ostrava 709 00, Republika Czeska.

ściej podejmowane przez rodziców w przekazach rodzinnych. Dane pochodzą z autentycznych nagrań wspólnej, rodzinnej komunikacji, zaistniałej w konkretnych sytuacjach (na przykład dzieci przygotowujące się do szkoły, podczas uprawiania sztuki i rzemiosła, siedzące przy stole itp). Naszym celem było opisanie i analiza – w kontekście realizacji strategii samozachowawczych – konkretnych przykładów w zakresie komunikacji rodzinnej, stosowanej przez rodziców w relacji z dzieckiem.

Słowa kluczowe: samozachowanie, pozycja komunikacyjna, interakcja rodzic – dziecko, funkcja komunikacji, kongruencja, sprzeczność komunikacyjna.

Introduction

This paper proceeds from the assumption that interaction between parents and children shows specific features, i.e. the child directed speech is based on using other language means of expression than interaction among adults. If the aim of this research is the analysis of socio-linguistic character, it is necessary to accept the fact that the point of departure – the communication situations as the source of our further research activity will be significantly differentiated because of the large variety of parents participating in our research. This will undoubtedly result in a large variety of language used in communication. Moreover, the language means of expression are related to the large number of various communication situations occurring in families.

The data gathered for our complex analysis resulted in a fairly long transcript of spoken discourse – the result of interaction between two or more participants speaking in different communication situations and conditions.

The aim of our research was to analyse spoken discourse between a parent/parents and a child/children (from 3–15 years of age). The recordings of spoken discourse were transcribed, analysed and described for the most frequent strategies used in communication situations occurring in families. Our attention was focused mainly on so called the "Satir Model"[1] (mapping stressful situations in communication), and, more precisely, on the proportion of their occurrence and the nature of the communication situations in which these models occur in the dominant role, etc.

In brief, it was our aim to describe the content of communication in families in concrete, pre-selected situations. Due to a wide range of possible communica-

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[1] The Satir Models are named after V. Satirová, the author of the Satir family therapy, who carried out studies in so called "clinical families". In our research, the aim is to examine so called "non--identified" families. Based on our experience, it may be said that the issue of self-preservation positions in family communications goes beyond the boundaries of families undergoing psychotherapeutic treatment. As such, we attempt to verify whether our expectations match the reality by analysing the transcripts of parent – child interactions in common families. For more details, please see: V. Satirová, *Kniha o rodině. Základní dílo psychologie vztahů*, Práh, Praha 2006.

tion situations which may be recorded in family communications, it was necessary to determine the types of situations in which the spoken discourse would be recorded and then analysed. For the first stage of our research we focused on the following communication situations: at the table; personal hygiene; putting a child to bed; playing with a child; common activities of parents and children (e.g. tidying up, getting ready for going to kindergarten and school, art and craft activities, etc.); talking about different aspects of everyday life in a family (e.g. talking about a day at school, about family plans, etc.). These are the situations which offer opportunities for misunderstanding or conflicts between parents and children.

As we are limited by the length of this paper, it is possible to list only a few of the research questions we dealt with:

1. Do the so called complementary models of communication described by Satir, occur in ordinary families and, more explicitly, in interaction between parents and children?
2. What types of communication models, described by Satir, are most frequently targeted at children in family communications?
3. What communication situations do the various models play the dominant role in?
4. What means of expression are used in various communication models?
5. Is it right to claim that human beings, in their need to protect themselves in communication, avoid speaking about their feelings and emotions? How much space is devoted to expressing feelings in interactions between a parent and a child?
6. Do the parents speak about their emotions (about their feelings) in situations when they experience sadness or joy?[2]
7. Are the findings of our research regarding the frequency of self-preservation positions similar to those described by Satir?

Methodology

On the basis of the first stage of our research, we decided to ask for further cooperation with those families which were already familiar to us. As such, we were allowed to gain a view of the inner family life (needless to say, the respondents participated in our research on a voluntary basis). It was not vital for us to

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[2] If they are able to speak about their own feelings, it may be a sign of congruent behaviour and high self-esteem. The need to protect oneself is present in most communications (V. Satirová et al., *Model růstu. Za hranice rodinné terapie*, Cesta, Brno 2005, p. 58). Many people are afraid to speak about their own feelings because if they do they are likely to be hurt. Therefore, they choose to use self-preservation positions protecting their Self/Ego. It is interesting to note that adults (as well as new born babies) desire the same – security and safety. Very often, they are ready to do anything to achieve them.

obtain the data from families of different backgrounds (we were not interested in the social status, in the level of parents' education, etc., even if those factors may be interesting for studying family communications). For the first stage, we selected the following set of situations to record the spoken discourse (although it was not possible to use all of them across all age groups): At the table; Personal hygiene; Going to bed; Playing with a child; Common activity of parents and children (e.g. tidying up, getting ready for kindergarten or school, doing art activities, etc.); Talking about unspecified aspects of everyday family life (e.g. talking about a day at school, common family plans, etc.).

It was decided that the research data would be collected by recording conversations in randomly selected families. The selection of elements for the research set applies most to a stratified selection because it had to fulfil several conditions:

1. Parents had to agree with recording the spoken discourse in a family;
2. The discourse was related to a communication situation between a parent (parents) and a child (children) concerning a specific working activity (e.g. getting ready for a day at school, during art or craft activities, preparing meals, etc.);
3. The child was between 3–15 years of age;
4. The length of a recording had not been decided before the data collection began (it was agreed that the parents themselves would decide how long the recording would be, yet they had been asked to make recordings as long as possible);
5. Intelligibility of a recording.

The size of our sample was determined in advance in such a way that it was supposed to grow until the variables began repeating themselves. A limiting factor of our research was the fact that the recordings were made by the parents themselves. It was their decision what and when they would record. On the basis of our data, it is possible to conclude that most of the recordings were made at the time when the parent was beginning to take a self-preservation position in communication.

In the first stage, the research sample was randomly selected – this is considered to be most appropriate with respect to the theory of probability. Random selection is not biased – any member of a concrete population stands the same chance to be selected into the final sample[3].

As our investigation was a part of a students' grant research project[4], the selected students helped us to record family communications. The research team consisted of eight students and two university lecturers who recorded the data for analysis from July 2014 to September 2015. The total number of recordings

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[3] N.F. Kerlinger, *Základy výzkumu chování*, Academia, Praha 1972, p. 62.
[4] "Identification of Models of Family Communications via Examining the Spoken Discourse" "Identifikace modelů rodinné komunikace prostřednictvím užitých jazykových prostředků" (SGS11/PdF/2014-2015).

of different lengths was 67, i.e. 15 hours 53 minutes and 43 seconds of family communications in total. Afterwards, all the recordings were transcribed and analysed.

So as to analyse the factors of family communications in depth, we decided to divide the transcribed data into three groups according to the age of the child/children who were the receivers of the child directed speech. The most logical procedure appeared to be dividing the transcripts according to the traditional stages of children's development. As such, the set of the data gathered was divided into three (differently saturated) groups according to the age of the participating child/children:

1. Recordings of the child directed speech to the pre-school children (from 3 to 6 years of age) – the set consisted of 34 recordings;
2. Recordings of the child directed speech to younger children (from 7–11 years of age) – the set consisted of 19 recordings;
3. Recordings of the child directed speech to older children (from 12 to 15 years of age) – the set consisted of 14 recordings.

Findings

One feature of a speech oriented on a child is the i n e q u a l i t y of the communication relationship. It is caused by the dominant position of one of the communicators which in our case is the parent. Although we can confirm that in many parts of the recorded dialogues we were able to acknowledge that the parent tries to apprehend the child as an equal partner while such cooperation is set mainly by jointly practiced activity (communication is thus subordinated by a common goal), still, the inequality of the communication relation is confirmed by a significant predominance of replicas expressing the will of the speaker.

First, we determined the situations when the parent "reaches out" for the self--preservation position in the child directed speech. The models of self-preservation position play the dominant role at the time when the parent feels insecure in his/her interaction with the child. It is the protection of the parent from the pain related to the child. The parent is facing the situation that something (in our case, the child's behaviour, or action, or experience) is not conforming to the parent's expectation. The experienced feeling of threat is very individual. The main feature of the parents' self-preservation positions is asserting themselves/enforcing their own will – they want reach their goal, the fulfilment of their request by their child – they want to eliminate the cause of their pain.

The most frequent communication strategy used by the parent in the child directed speech was a c c u s a t i o n, noted in 113 cases.

The second communication strategy used was the s u p e r - r e a s o n a b l e s e l f - p r e s e r v a t i o n p o s i t i o n, noted in 55 cases.

R e c o n c i l i a t i o n was used by the parent in 11 cases in our sample.

C l o s i n g   d o w n the activity was noted in 9 cases in our sample. It is necessary to add that due to the limited possibilities of our recordings it was difficult to determine this communication strategy.

In our sample, t h e   c o n g r u e n t   p o s i t i o n taken by the parent was not noted. However, we need to point out that our analysis is based only on the transcripts of the interaction recorded between the parents and the children. It would have been helpful to have a visual picture of the whole situation in order to better specify the parent's position.

As can be seen from our results, the ratio of congruence and incongruence is not balanced in our sample. On the contrary, the need to protect oneself in the communication prevailed. The impacts of parental self-preservation positions can be seen in concerns they communicate. In cases where the parent is using a superrational position in his/her communication with the child than it provides the child clear information saying where he/she belongs. For example – the child comes with a request for permission to go out to a friend. In a case where the parent starts to tediously argue and count out reasons against it and why it is not appropriate, the child receives through this communication a clear statement – you are too small, I do not trust you, you are not enough, you belong between the four walls, you need protection etc. Such a result is similar to what Virginia Satirová[5] states about our need to defend ourselves against threats by avoiding speaking about our feelings. Congruence[6] may be characterized as an ability, skill and possibility to freely express one's own needs, emotions, thoughts, and views (an open system). It is a way of self-expression when what we say and do is in accordance with our inner world, experience and thinking. To put it more simply, congruence may be understood as a state when a person may, at any time, afford to become a human being who does not have to defend him/herself. It is possible to claim that unhealthy ways of treating oneself as well as incongruence in one's behaviour usually have their origin in the person's childhood. As Ladislav Nykl[7] claims, many mental deficiencies of the members of the family developed during constant incongruence in the family relationships.

Based on our data, it is not possible to conclude how much time (from the total time of interaction with the child) the parents spend on securing their self-preservation positions. Our recordings were of different lengths. Their lengths

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[5] V. Satirová et al., *Model růstu...*, op. cit., p. 58.

[6] The opposite of congruence is incongruence. Speierer (In Daniela Šiffelová: D. Šiffelová, *Rogersovská psychoterapie pro 21. století. Vybraná témata z historie a současnosti*, Grada Publishing, Praha 2010, p. 123) describes incongruence as the key to the origin of mental disorders. The roots of incongruence may be found in emotional disturbances, the causes of which appear as follows: factors in social communication (conditions of appraisal, discrepancy between social and personal values), bio-neuro-psychological inability to achieve congruence, social and non-social life events.

[7] L. Nykl, *Carl Ransom Rogers a jeho teorie. Přístup zaměřený na člověka*, Grada, Praha 2012, p. 94.

depended on the readiness of the respondents to record the parent – child inter-action in the family. Apart from that, the data gathering depended on a number of cases when the child might "threaten" the parent, when the parent would be confronted with pain and the child would offer him/her to fall back to the self--preservation position. It seems clear that falling back to a self-preservation po-sition is related to the child acting as a starter. The most frequently occurred in the self-preservation dialogue between parent–child communication functions of reproach (in 82 cases), directions (in 62 cases), evaluating criticism (in 40 cases), threats (in 27 cases) and explanation (in 27 cases). Please see the examples below.

After identifying the individual communication models focused on the child as a receiver of the message, it was necessary to determine how the self-pre-servation strategies are reflected in the parent's speech, i.e. what communication functions of the language are used in the discourse. The most frequent in the parent – child interaction were the expressions of reproach, an order, a threat or an evaluating/judging criticism and an explanation (please see the examples below).

On the basis of our analysis, it may be concluded that the use of such lan-guage expressions signalled incongruence, while occurrences of congruence were missing. Congruent behaviour may be characterized, amongst other things, by a readiness to trust others, by a readiness to take risks and be vulnerable, by openness to intimacy, by the ability to accept others, by flexibility and openness to change[8]. Such aspects of congruent behaviour were not recorded in our re-search sample.

There were several signs of humiliation and denouncement found in our data, e.g. many examples of accusation appeared, such as – r e p r o a c h (e.g. *you don't mind ↓ that Honzík is screaming because of you ↓ DO YOU ↑ because I scream at you ↓*), t h r e a t s (e.g. *stop throwing a tantrum or I'll go away↓*), w a r n i n g s (e.g. *STOP driving ME mad ↓ honestly STOP driving me MAD ↓; I'm getting angry with you ↓ / you'll be surprised how angry I can be ↓ I'll be really FURious ↓; so you're ↑ you're LAUGHing at me ↑ ☺*), c r i t i c a l a p -p r a i s a l (e.g. *oh dear ↓ / you are such a pain in the neck ↓ / I can't believe it ↓; no ↓ Lucinka you're a silly goose ↓ / so ↓ RIGHT up and again yes ↑*) and expressing m i s t r u s t (e.g. *so I hope that when I come to school on Monday to have a look at your PE it will not look the same ↓*), or by a c o m b i n a t i o n o f the previous e x p r e s s i o n s (threat + reproach – e.g. *nothing ↑ / it's all the same to me Eliška ↓ you'll have it coming to you later ↓ // at least ONCE if you could score an A ↓*).

It is highly probable that the examples of incongruent behaviour listed above have a negative impact on the quality of a family life. It was not our aim to examine whether the participants in our research were satisfied with their

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family life. However, it is possible to conclude from the data that our respondents are not satisfied with the way they themselves communicate in the family. As emphasized above, unsatisfactory family communication has an impact on developing self-esteem. Apart from the participants' negative perceptions of their communication, it may well be that other areas of family life will be influenced – e.g. the resilience of the family, the whole quality of family life, trust, openness, cohesiveness and other parameters which are important signs of a healthy family life. Referring to incongruence, Satirová states that:

> "[...] the members of a dysfunctional family fear to ask each other what they in fact mean – as if they were saying: I can't tell you what I can see and hear and think and feel, or else it will kill you, or you will attack me or leave me [...]"[9].

However, the real cause is not that incongruent, unhealthy behaviour. Incongruence is the result of low self-esteem and unhealthy self-assessment[10].

Discussion

The most frequent communication strategy used by the parent in the child directed speech was accusation, noted in 113 cases. If we look at the impact (as described above) of such a communication strategy on the child development and the family life, this finding is alarming[11].

The ratio of congruence and incongruence is not balanced in our sample. Such a result is similar to what Satirová[12] states about our need to defend ourselves against threats by avoiding speaking about our feelings. In our sample of data, we noted only one case when the parents spoke about their feelings. From this anecdotal evidence, it cannot be claimed that the parents in our sample need to defend themselves against threat while talking to their children. Nevertheless, our results indicate that the parents avoid speaking about their feelings when talking to their children, which may be caused by the fact that such a way of communication provides a feeling of security for them. Similar results were published by Josef Langmeier and Dana Krejčířová[13], who point out that parents speak with their children about their own feelings only "very rarely".

As for the frequency of self-preservation positions occurring in the population, Satirová (2006) mentions the following percentage representation: recon-

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[9] J. Langmeier, K. Balcar, J. Špitz, *Dětská psychoterapie*, Portál, Praha 2000, p. 195.

[10] Langmeier and Krejčířová (J. Langmeier, D. Krejčířová, *Vývojová psychologie*, Grada, Praha 2006, p. 139) supply evidence that the insufficient appraisal of one's own self may be the cause of many mental disorders.

[11] See e.g. Rotraud Pernerová: R. Pernerová: *Tabu v rodinné komunikaci*, Portál, Praha 2000.

[12] V. Satirová et al., *Model růstu...*, op. cit., p. 58.

[13] J. Langmeier, D. Krejčířová, *Vývojová psychologie...*, op. cit., p. 98.

ciliation – 50%, accusation – 30%, super-reasonable attitude – 15%, closing down /stopping the activity – 0.5% and congruence – from 1% to 4.5% cases. This sequence was not confirmed in our findings. The the accusation model was dominant, followed by the super-reasonable and reconciliation models. Only in the case of closing down the activity did the results agree with the distribution in Satir's sample[14].

Psychologists and psychotherapists perceive a close relationship between incongruent communication and low self-esteem. They also describe the impact of such incongruent communication on children. Self-esteem is formed in the interaction between the parent and the child. If the self-esteem is low, the person experiences strong feelings of anxiety and insecurity from his/her own existence[15]. His/her self-esteem depends on the meaning of others, an individual is in an unequal relationship to his/her social environment, but also to his/her parents; on the other hand, if the self-esteem is high, an individual accepts oneself as s/he is, accepts oneself and others, s/he is open to change, s/he is ready to take risks and s/he accepts responsibility. Franz Ruppert[16] describes more signs of high self-esteem, such as ability to perceive reality appropriately and clearly, to remember past memories, to trust one's environment, to create emotional relations, to free oneself from unsatisfactory relationships, to respect the sexual orientation of others, to be capable of self-reflection, to be ready to take responsibility for oneself, to be willing to accept truth, to believe in one's ability to solve problems. Self-esteem arises in the family and it develops during family interactions (i.e. most frequently in the interactions between the parent and the child). Satirová[17] emphasizes that one negative experience in childhood may have a fundamental effect on developing self-esteem. The development of self-esteem is most hampered by parents who humiliate, denounce or punish their children for their behaviour, i.e. those parents whose self-esteem is not high. An interesting result was obtained by Höhnova´s research[18] who observed expectations of secondary school children. She found out that if the pupils are confronted with the possibility of a failure they expect their teachers mainly to castigate, reproach, comment, punish, admonish or threaten them. In case of a failure the children expected from their parents the following: beating, reproaches, parents being sad or admonishment. It's interesting that in our research (although we observed a diametrically different entity) somewhat similar results were reached (without any attempt to confront these two incomparable researches). Undoubtedly, it is obvi-

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[14] As it is unclear how V. Satir, proceeded when identifying the stressful positions, it is not possible to verify this case.

[15] See: V. Satirová, *Společná terapie rodiny*, Portál, Praha 2007, pp. 20–22.

[16] F. Ruppert, *Symbióza a autonomie. Traumata z narušeného systému rodinných vazeb*, Portál, Praha 2011, p. 75.

[17] V. Satirová, *Kniha o rodině...*, op. cit., p. 34.

[18] See: V. Pokorná, *Teorie a náprava vývojových poruch učení a chování*, Portál, Praha 2001, pp. 121–126.

ous that the expectations which inevitably stem from the children's experience have a real foundation in parents´ behaviour towards their children.

More detailed and complete results of our research are dealt with in the joint publication Kamila Sekerová and Ondřej Sekera[19].

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[19] See: K. Sekerová, O. Sekera, *Řeč orientovaná na dítě – rodičovské perspektivy a limity* (*sebezáchovné komunikační pozice v praxi*), PdF Ostravské univerzity, Ostrava 2016.