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# FACTORS OF RISK BEHAVIOR AND PERCEIVED CONTROL OF ADOLESCENTS IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *The contribution is focused on the relation between risk behavior and perceived control of the adolescents aged 12-15 years. Perceived control is conceptualized by the Skinner's theory. It consists of four basic variables: effort, attitudes, powerful others, luck. Risk behavior is conceptualized by Mezera's theory. Mezera assumes that risk behavior in school consists of several types of behavior: asocial, antisocial, egocentric, impulsive, maladaptive, negativistic and lean towards the problem groups. In our research group there were 109 adolescents visiting the primary school in Stropkov (Slovakia). We hypothesized that the adolescents with high level of risk behavior will have the lower level of perceived control. Our hypothesis can't be accepted because we didn't find out the significant difference in the perceived control in the relation to antisocial, egocentric behavior and lean towards the problem groups. On the other hand we found out the differences in the perceived control in the relation to asocial, impulsive, maladaptive and negativistic behavior. The results show the importance of personal believes about Self in the relation risk behavior production.*

**Keywords:** *perceived control, risk behavior, adolescence*

## 1. Introduction

The risk behavior can be a specific form of adolescents' activity which is very typical for this ontogenetic stage. According various criteria we can say that more than 50 % of adolescents behave by the way we evaluate as risky at least one in life. If we seriously look at the statistical numbers and results of the periodical researches (for example SAHA, ESPAD) in the area of risk adolescent behavior we discover that only 2 % of adolescents are really problematic and have some troubles with serious violation. Drinking of alcohol, smoking, fast driving or early start of sexual contact are some of the examples of the risk behavior which can have the significant influence to the future life of young people. There exist a lot of interpretations of the risk behavior reasons. One of them is concerned on the psychological variables. And this lense is used also in this contribution. We try to identify if the risk behavior is in the relation with psychological variables, especially with perceived control.

## 2. Perceived Control

There exist a lot of theories of perceived control. But in our research we work with Skinner's theory (1995). According to Skinner (1995), perceived control is derived from four dominant theories of control including Weiner's causal attributions, Seligman's learned helplessness, Bandura's self-efficacy, and locus of control. It is based on the theory of the action which looks at the action as a central unit of behavior analysis (Boesch, 1976; Frese, Sabini, 1985). The action is defined as a goal-oriented, intentional, emotionally coloured behavior enacted in a social context. The differentiation of theoretical components of action: agents, means, ends and relations among them were the central task

of the Skinner's conceptualization of perceived control. If we accept this fact we can define three complexes of believes:

- a) Believes about control  
They refer to generalized anticipations about the extent in which Self can produces desired events and avoid undesired ones.
- b) Believes about strategy  
They refer to generalized anticipations about the extent in which some means or causes are adequate conditions for production of ends or outcomes.
- c) Believes about capacities  
They refer to generalized anticipations about the extent in which Self controls or has an access to the means.

The term belief is used to the nature of perceived control. It indicates cognitive constructions which are opened to change. They refer to the future (expectations) or past (attributions). Skinner (1995) assumes that the regulation and interpretation of action is a function of believes. Believes about control are primary regulative believes (I have a control, so I am competent). Interpretative believes are believes about capacities (I have an attribute which is necessary to be successful) and believes about strategies (I use an attribute which I to be successful). All complexes of believes are considered for separated cognitive constructions. From the aspect of semantics, we consider believes about control for the combination of believes about capacities and believes about strategies. So if someone disposes the ability to apply the effective strategy, then he/she has a control. Interpretative believes (believes about capacities and believes about strategies) are filled by attributions which we know from the theories of Levenson (1981) and Lefcourt (1981). It means that these attributions

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are effort, attitudes, powerful others, luck and unknown strategies.

### 3. Risk Behavior

Risk behavior is a quite short term for a very wide variety of undesirable forms of behavior that may be developed in an adolescence period.

Jessor (1991) classifies the risk behavior into three categories: abuse of psychoactive substances, psychosocial disorders and risk sexual behavior.

Dolejš (2010) defines risk behavior as individual or group behavior that causes demonstrable increase of social, psychological, medical, developmental, physiological and other risks to humans, their environment and society.

The same author tries to clarify all this issue relying on aetiology (Širůček, Širůčková, Macek, 2007), definitions of dissocial behavior (Švarcová, 2002), asocial behavior (Hartl, Hartlová, 2004), antisocial behavior (Švarcová, 2002), delinquent behavior (Koudelková, 1995). He perceives the risk behavior as a superior term to above mentioned forms of behavior (dissocial, asocial, antisocial, delinquent) and as a multidisciplinary problem.

Širůčková (2012) defines risk behavior as a term covering a variety of forms of behavior that have a negative impact on the health, social and psychological functioning of a person or endanger his/her social surroundings, while the threat may be real or anticipated. Generally, we may state that a reason of development of these behavior forms (disorders) is multifactorial and specific for particular disease entities.

Nielsen Sobotková et al. (2014) defines the risk behavior through a lot of categories: (1) truancy, (2) lying, (3) aggression, (4) bullying, cyberbullying, (5) criminal behavior, (6) addictions, (7) risk behavior on internet, (8) risk sexual behavior, (9) risk behavior in traffic, (10) extreme risk sports, (11) anabolics and steroids using, (12) unhealthy eating habits, (13) extremism, subcultures, (14) xenophobia, racism, intolerance, anti-Semitism.

We would like to point out that the level of intelligence is not a factor that would increase a chance of risk behavior. However, adolescents who produce risk behavior often fail in a school performance. Mostly, it is a parental failure which meets with rejection of customary conventions. Risk behavior represents a major research problem in terms of aetiology (cause of development), symptomatology (manifestations), categorization and general theoretical delimitations.

The legitimate assumption is the relation between risk behavior and perceived control. If we agree with the description of perceived control as a set of beliefs about one's role in society, about own power to influence the environment, we can hypothesize that the high risk behavior, which is the indicator of low beliefs about oneself and his/her importance in society, is in the relation with low perceived control.

### 4. Method

The research sample consisted of 109 adolescents aged 12-15, average age 13.54. The girls and the boys were divided into the same sized groups. The probants were the students from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grades of the primary school in Stropkov in Slovakia.

In our research we used two methods:

*SRBP - The Scale of Risk Behavior of the Pupil*

Author: Mezera (2000)

It is a forty-six items questionnaire. The items are evaluated by probants by seven point scale. The outputs of the questionnaire are the subscales named as asocial behavior, antisocial behavior, egocentric behavior, impulsive behavior, maladaptive behavior, negativistic behavior, lean towards problem groups.

This questionnaire is primarily conceived as the rating scale through which the teachers evaluate the adolescent behavior. Because of the relative high counts of probants in the research we modified the items of the questionnaire into self-rating form.

*SPoCQ - Student Perceptions of Control Questionnaire*

Author: Skinner (1995)

It is a sixty items questionnaire. The items are evaluated by probants by four point scale. The questionnaire is created for measurement of diverse indexes connected with perceived control in educational environment: effort, attitudes, powerful others, luck, promote (factors facilitating perceived control), undermine (factors stressing perceived control), control. In this contribution we used only the total score, it means the scale control.

### 5. Results

We applied Statistical Program for Social Science 20.0 while testing hypothesis. As statistical methods we applied t-test. We consider a standard level  $p \leq 0.05$  as a critical value of significance which points to important relationships between variables, resp. significant differences among research groups.

In the first step of analysis we divided the types of risk behavior into two groups – low and high level. This distribution was realized according to average mean. The probants who scored below the mean were in low level of the risk behavior. The probants who scored above the mean were in high level of the risk behavior. Then we compared these two groups in the relation to perceived control of adolescents.

Results of analysis are displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

From the table 1 we can read that in all cases the high level of risk behavior is in the relation with low level of perceived control (also Figure 1). But in the case of antisocial, egocentric behavior and lean towards the problem groups we didn't find out the significant indexes. From this reason we can't accept the hypothesis. On the other hand we found out the differences in the perceived control in the relation to asocial, impulsive, maladaptive and negativistic behavior.

### 6. Conclusions

On the base of our findings we can characterize the adolescents in lower secondary education with low level of perceived control by (consistent with Mezera's interpretation):

- Poor integration into peer groups caused by unacceptance of the social norms and rules.
  - Different perception of the social values and interpersonal relations.
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- Psychomotoric disturbance, high excitability, unadequate reactions, instability.
- Malfunction of will regulation and self-control in the sense of non-productive dynamics of behavior and absence of goal orientation and intentionality.
- Poor social competence.
- Failures in the area of social learning.
- Aversion, refusing of actually realized activity.
- Passivity, hostility, escapes, elective mutism.
- School refusal, fears.

*Table 1 Comparisons of adolescents' perceived control score according to level of risk factors*

behavior	perceived control		t	p
	low	high		
asocial			2.616	0.005
N	70	39		
M	14.90	7.87		
SD	13.43	13.51		
SEM	1.61	2.16		
antisocial			1.472	0.072
N	78	31		
M	13.61	9.31		
SD	14.03	12.97		
SEM	1.59	2.33		
egocentric			1.288	0.100
N	64	45		
M	13.81	10.36		
SD	13.24	14.50		
SEM	1.66	2.16		
impulsive			1.771	0.040
N	57	52		
M	14.60	9.95		
SD	13.56	13.82		
SEM	1.80	1.92		
maladaptive			1.763	0.040
N	63	46		
M	14.36	9.68		
SD	13.70	13.66		
SEM	1.73	2.01		
negativistic			1.804	0.037
N	70	39		
M	14.15	9.22		
SD	13.85	13.36		
SEM	1.65	2.14		
lean towards problem groups			1.305	0.098
N	72	37		
M	13.62	9.98		
SD	14.63	11.89		
SEM	1.72	1.95		

Legend: N = count; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; SEM = standard error of mean; t = value of t-test; p = significance

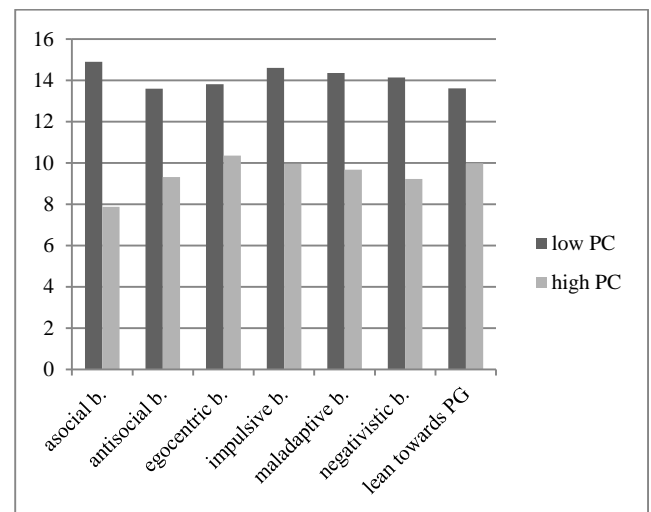
It means that the adolescents who believe that they have no important role in the society behave by the ways which were described in the text above.

These findings can't be generalized to the whole population of adolescents because of the size of the research sample which is not representative. But we can say that the personal features as perceived control are the variables which

influence the behavior of the adolescents (and people in general).

Low perceived control as a representative set of beliefs contains beliefs about inconsistency and uncontrollability of the world. So world (environmental, social, educational, etc.) starts to be misunderstandable for the adolescents, they are lost in it and try to find out their own place in it and to handle with negative emotions following this state of disappointment. We evaluate their behavior as risky. But from their point of view it is an effort to adapt to new context and they don't know their behavior is not mature.

These findings open the old questions about the role of the emotional and social support in the family, the support of the teachers in the schools, the attitudes of the pupils toward the school etc. and their influence to the behavior.



Legend: b. = behavior; PG = problem groups; PC = perceived control

*Figure 1: Comparisons of adolescents' perceived control score according to level of risk factors*

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