



# Dysfunctions of family system and juvenile delinquency

## Dysfunkcje systemu rodzinnego a przestępczość nieletnich

mgr Aleksandra Dymowska, mgr Marta Pięta

Wydział Nauk Społecznych, Uniwersytet Gdański

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to present the subject of dysfunction in families of juvenile perpetrators of criminal acts. The thesis concerns specific features of juvenile delinquents' families.

The first part of the article covers the issues of dysfunctional family system and describes disorders of this area. The second part presents the issues of youth crime in terms of the theory relating to the causes of juvenile delinquency.

The authors analyze the way how biological factors influence the criminal behaviour of young people, psychological theories of deviant behaviour and sociological conditions of criminal behaviour. Finally, the article addresses the role and meaning of the family in the etiology of juvenile criminal behaviour.

**Keywords:** systems theory • family systems • dysfunctional family • adolescents • juvenile delinquency

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł porusza tematykę dysfunkcji w rodzinach nieletnich sprawców czynów zabronionych. Prezentowana analiza jest próbą poznania specyficznych cech rodzin młodzieży przestępczej.

Pierwsza część tekstu obejmuje zagadnienia dysfunkcyjnego systemu rodzinnego i zawiera opis zaburzeń tego obszaru. W części drugiej przedstawiono kwestie przestępczości młodzieży w ujęciu teorii odnoszących się do przyczyn przestępczości nieletnich.

W prezentowanej pracy uwzględniono wpływ czynników biologicznych na przestępcze zachowanie młodzieży, psychologiczne teorie wyjaśniające zachowania dewiacyjne oraz socjologiczne rozumienie zachowań niezgodnych z prawem.

Ponadto, podjęto tu zagadnienia roli i znaczenia rodziny w kontekście etiologii rozwoju zachowań przestępczych u osób nieletnich.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teoria systemów • systemy rodzinne • dysfunkcyjne rodziny • młodzież • przestępczość nieletnich

## INTRODUCTION

The first and at the same time the most important sociological unit in which one lives and develops is the family, which is „*the closest environment surrounding the child (...) provides it with love, and the picture of the world and the society to which a child must adapt, and its various activities are factors shaping their first reflexes and reactions*” [6]. Family environment is a specific social group necessary for the proper development of the child. In the literature one can find many different ways of understanding family [1, 33, 41]. Acting on it, it significantly influences the development of its ability to function independently in other social systems. When a family system becomes dysfunctional, undesired interactions can lead to serious disorders in the development of an individual and constitute a risk factor which is conducive for social maladjustment, addiction to psychoactive substances or crime [27].

This article examines the family of a juvenile offender from the perspective of systems theory. Understanding the characteristics of family systems of youth manifesting criminal behaviour may significantly improve the effectiveness of interactions undertaken not only towards juvenile offenders but also their families. Additionally, it can provide the ability to design preventive actions aimed at preventing crime in the youth environment.

## DYSFUNCTIONS OF FAMILY SYSTEMS

### 2.1 Dysfunctional family in terms of systems theory

In the classical systems perspective adopted in this article, family is defined as a system characterized by a specific structure, patterns of functioning and relationship patterns whose stability is conditioned by volatility over time [10]. In other words, it is a system of mutual interactions involving members of the family group. Family systems are made of subsystems that fulfill the basic functions of a family. Processes within one subsystem interact and simultaneously are determined by both its participants, as well as other family members and interactions in other subsystems [8].

Each family is exposed to the occurrence of a variety of tensions and crises. They are the result of the natural developmental changes, as well as unpredictable life events. All changes in the family system link with maintaining its balance. Disorders related to the destabilization can relate to relationships between members of the family system, their emotional ties, interpersonal communication and the strategy and the rules of the family system. As a result of transitional disturbance, a system faces an opportunity to obtain new resources to deal with crisis situations. Sometimes, however, they transform into a phenomenon of a permanent nature leading to profound life disturbances of the family system and its dysfunction [29].

Dysfunctional family is a system with a limited ability to perform its functions properly and is not able to fulfill obligations towards its individual members and to effectively deal with crisis and new situations [2]. Dysfunctions of the family system may cover different areas of performed tasks and based on this complete and partial dysfunction are distinguished. Complete

dysfunction is characterized by the inability of the system to complete its tasks and there is a need for other specialized family systems to take over its duties. The system with partial dysfunction manifests restrictions in the implementation of only a range of basic functions and the resulting tasks [25].

## 2.2 Disorders of the family system structure

Family systems are subject to various internal influences which are linked with their natural developmental changes, as well as external impacts associated with the society's expectations. Functional family is capable of constant change and transformation of hierarchy and the interactional, intrafamily layout while maintaining its durability and identity [32]. Appropriate reaction of the system to exerted pressure is possible thanks to its optimal structure characterized by stability and flexibility [16]. A family whose structure appears incapable of functioning becomes a dysfunctional system. Disorders relate to its limits, the system of power and the family hierarchy, as well as the formation of pathological behaviours among family members [15].

An element of impaired structure affecting the level of dysfunctionality is the external border which controls the exchange of information between the family and the environment [17]. Disorders of the external borders can manifest itself in their excessive permeability or stiffness. [31]. A system with disturbed structure is also characterized by internal borders which interfere with its proper functioning and lead to formation of abnormal interaction among its members. The boundaries of dysfunctional families are indefinite and vague, or overly rigid [28].

Due to the characteristics of family systems' internal and external borders there are two types of families: mixed families, also referred to as tangled and uninvolved families, called disengaged. In mixed families with indefinite boundaries subsystems are not clearly differentiated. Family hierarchy, the role of individual members of the system and the resulting functions

and responsibilities are unclear to them [18]. These families are characterized by the excess of information, inadequately strong reactions to the changes and the rapid spread of stress between family subsystems. Members of these systems suffer therefore from difficulties in the development of autonomy and from acquiring cognitive and affective competencies [31].

The boundaries of uninvolved families are too rigid and impermeable, which distorts or makes the communication between the subsystems impossible. Members of disengaged family systems have a limited ability to express mutual care and understanding. The family provides them with support and interest only in threatening or extremely difficult situations. Members of disengaged systems achieve a high level of autonomy, but only to a limited extent are able to develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to the group. A common feature of both family types is that their members experience difficulties and tensions in situations requiring adaptation to changing conditions [18].

Disorders in family structure also include the intrafamilial hierarchy and the system of power associated with it. In families whose structure is disturbed a process leading to the emergence of irregularities in the system of power and hierarchy defined as parentification begins. It can cause dysfunction of the family, preventing or hindering the implementation of its care and educational functions. Dysfunctional family systems in which the power and control belong to the children, or the parents are dependent on children in meeting their own basic needs, deprive the child of opportunities to learn responsibility and self-control [28].

Triads can shape in the structure of each family system performing its regulatory function. Their formation is associated with the emergence of tensions and conflicts that occur between two people related emotionally. One of the people trying to reduce the level of tension in the conflict introduces a third party

who, by participating, needs to take the side of one of the parties. A created triad may cause further triads. In a situation when the dispute involves further family members, the conflict deepens or concerns people belonging to different generations, family structure may be compromised. Triads emerging at the time are pathological in their nature [15].

### 2.3 Roles of the child in a dysfunctional family

In dysfunctional families, characterized by a lack of stability and satisfying basic needs, there is a high threat level which prevents family members from performing their roles. Achieving a sense of stability or meeting the security needs requires establishing specific behaviour patterns [36]. They determine which feelings and behaviours of family members are desired, they also designate central family topics which maintain a system of lies and denials. The roles in a dysfunctional family are rigid and their choice is made unconsciously and accepted by all its members [7]. They are focused on the needs of the system as a whole, in which they have a conservative, supportive and strengthening function. They do not address the individual needs and desires of its members. [37]

The researchers of dysfunction family categorized the roles adopted by the members of these systems. Typology developed by C. Black [4] contains the characteristics of the three roles: the responsible child who performs the duty of an adult, provides care, stability and harmony; the adapted child who is a passive observer of family life and the conciliator who cares about the well-being of the family and satisfying its emotional needs. The most common, however, is the division that describes four roles: a family hero, scapegoat, angel and mascot [34].

The roles performed by members of a dysfunctional family are the typical survival strategies. They set the way of their functioning in the outside world and protect them against the risks associated with dysfunctional interaction of the system [37].

### 2.4 Family communication disorders

In family systems in which the interactions of family members have a circular character, interactions take place on the basis of feedback. When there are dysfunctions in the family, the operation of the feedback process is disturbed. This applies both to the intrafamily interaction and those occurring elsewhere [32].

One of the characteristic symptoms of family communication disorder is the emergence of communication barriers. They are individual reactions of family members which interfere the family communication. Extent of the distortion can vary depending on their frequency. Occasional use of communication barriers is usually not associated with major consequences. On the other hand, when family members are using them more often, or if they become their habit, they may significantly interfere with communication and limit its openness. The use of communication barriers then leads to lower self-esteem, acquiring a defensive attitude towards this person and the feeling of psychological discomfort [21].

Family communication disorders are also caused by the use of dysfunctional patterns of communication. There are three kinds of communication patterns characteristic for dysfunctional families: blocking, displacement and damaged communication. The first one takes place when the interfamily interactions and family contacts with the outside world are extremely limited. Displacement of communication is related to the manifestation of specific psychopathological symptoms by one person in the family. A characterized symptom can be a displaced, surrogate way of family communication. Damage to the communication manifests itself in the inconsistency between the individual elements of the communication [31].

Inadequate conflict resolution strategies have also a significant influence on the formation of commu-

nication disorders in the family. They are characterized by low effectiveness and solutions achieved as a result of their use are typically superficial and temporary. They do not remove either the cause or consequences of the conflict, and therefore more often than not lead to its escalation. T. Rostowska [35] describes eight destructive ways of managing conflicts: avoidance, the use of force, minimizing, blaming, „silencers“, „bag“, manipulation and personal rejection. In families where conflicts are not properly dealt with the emotional ties between their members are often weakened. Growing tension, linked with unresolved conflict, prevents them from making contact in situations other than conflict, significantly disrupting interpersonal relationships in the family [14].

## 2.5 The rules of dysfunctional family system

In dysfunctional families in which interactions between family members are disturbed characteristic rules are shaped. They are hidden and act unconsciously, not allowing the family to function properly. J. Bradshaw [7] distinguishes the following rules and principles of dysfunctional families: control, perfectionism, blaming, denial, silence, myth creation, failing to complete, lack of trust.

The main function of control is to protect the family system from experiencing the feeling of shame which is connected with a sense of rejection and neglect. Preventing members of the family from experiencing shame adapts them to mastering the skills of denying or ignoring their own feelings. Control provides a sense of power and security, strengthens the belief in the predictability of events and their ability to influence the feelings and behaviour of others [37].

In dysfunctional family systems the principle of perfectionism also applies. It requires perfection from family members in every area of life and is always associated with the assessment, measuring achievements and competition [3]. Using this principle, they

avoid confronting the true picture of themselves and experiencing feelings. The principle of perfectionism rules out the possibility of errors and imperfection, causing family members to feel frustration and despair [7].

In a situation where the rule of control turns out not to be effective enough, dysfunctional family system activates a different defense strategy involving mutual accusation among its members. Prosecution rule, as well as control, is to hide the sense of shame of family members [36]. Hiding shame allows the family members to avoid confrontation with their own feelings and real image of themselves [7].

Another characteristic mechanism of regulating interactions in the dysfunctional system is denial. Its activity leads the family members to a disrupted perception of the surrounding reality. This principle is mainly based on the denial of their feelings, perceptions, thoughts, ideas and experiences, particularly those associated with a sense of grievance and suffering [37].

The denial is directly related to the rule of silence. It assumes a total ban on openly expressing feelings, thoughts and experiences, focusing on the pain and loneliness related to family dysfunction [7]. The commitment of family members to remain silent on topics important to them increases the sense of fear and shame, confirming their belief that it is not worth it to talk about anything [40].

The mechanism of illusion is important for maintaining the cohesion of dysfunctional family system. As a result, a family creates specific myths replacing real feelings and experiences of its members. By maintaining the operation of control, prosecution and denial, family myths make the system more rigid and closed, and the true picture becomes inaccessible for the environment [37].

Dysfunctional families are guided by the principle of uncompleting which is based on not resolving situations

arising from the interactions between family members. This rule can manifest itself in two ways. Family members either remain in a state of chronic struggle and conflict, or agree to avoid any conflict. Uncompleting which causes intractable family disputes or forced agreement prevents the family members from mutual contact and reinforces the state of anxiety and confusion [7].

Lack of trust is the basis of disturbed contact by the principle of uncompleting in dysfunctional family system. This rule functions as a defense. It is used in order to protect family members from getting hurt or rejected, it also enhances their sense of self-sufficiency. The consequence of the lack of trust in the family is a deepening sense of emotional cutoff of its members and the deprivation of their needs [37].

### 3. REASONS FOR JUVENILE CRIME

An attempt to find and explain the causes of crime among minors has been a subject of interest for researchers in the area of criminology, psychology, pedagogy or sociology for years. When analyzing the literature, it appears advisable to distinguish two groups of theories of crime taking into account factors affecting the development of illegal behaviour among adolescents. The first group are those that relate directly to a juvenile. These factors are endogenous and understood as a biological, psychological, physiological and medical. The second group consists of exogenous factors, namely those that occur in the environment of minors. These phenomena are perceptual, sociological, political, social or educational [26]. H. and M. Veillard-Cybulscy include the following groups: anthropological, sociological, biological, and psychological and psychiatric [42]. On the other hand C. Czapów reviews the theories about the causes of crime, referring, among others, to the social disorganization theory, the theory of cultural conflict or biological theories [17]. A more extensive division and classification of criminological theories of crime is presented by M. Ciosek who highlights four main categories which constitute a superior classification structure [12].

### 3.1. Biological theories of criminality

Biological positions relate to the properties of biological structures of the body which according to the theoretical concept are responsible for criminal behaviour. Among these theories, the concept that has gained particular notoriety is C. Lombroso's „born criminals” and the concept of W.H. Sheldon, indicating the connection between a body type and crime.

One of the first review papers on the effects of biological and psychological factors on juvenile delinquency was the work of an Italian doctor C. Lombroso: „The reasons and combating of crime” [26]. On the basis of, among others, juvenile offenders who were placed in juvenile halls the author initiated the theory that the so-called. „moral curvature” in children manifests itself much stronger than in adults, however, have the same cause, understood as inherited tendencies. Lombroso assumed that children are born with congenital tendencies towards criminal behaviour [26]. At the same time he did not recognize the impact of upbringing and other factors to the shaping of human behaviour. E.A. Hooton refers to the theory of Lombroso, who in his research also looked for sources of criminal behaviour in biological agents [17]. This American researcher tried to prove connection between racial characteristics and different types of crime. Similarly to Lombroso, he tested many juvenile offenders, what has become a theory which says that the mental degeneration is also accompanied by organic degeneration. This means that a man who has a propensity for criminal behaviour, has atavistic features of prehistoric man, ie. withdrawn forehead, skull deformities, strongly developed jaw and cheekbones, very small or protruding ears, not very long arms and anomalies of the teeth [11].

At this point it is worth mentioning perinatal injuries and their impact on the development of an individual's personality. In most cases these types of injuries have very serious consequences. How-

ever, in extreme cases, they may cause characteropathy [5]. In less severe cases, psychic infantilism, distorted or inharmonious development of the nervous system may occur, which could externalize for example in depression or hyperactivity of the individual [38].

### 3.2. Psychological theories of crime

Among psychological theories underpinning the explanation of criminal behaviour is the assumption of specific psychological constructs that can promote the selection of criminogenic behaviours or block desirable behaviour. Ch. Andersen, D. Abrahamsen, Alexander F., H. Hartman are among the representatives of psychological theories. This position explains the crime through occurrence of certain personality traits which are often the variables helping in diagnosing personality disorders, especially antisocial ones. While discussing the issues of crime among minors it is worth noting that young offenders are persons who are not diagnosed with personality disorders but only its development in the wrong direction. This does not mean, however, that among the socially maladjusted youth one cannot observe properties in the area of psychopathology of personality. Psychological variables favour the selection of dysfunctional forms of behaviour and hinder adaptation options which are socially approved. This view in criminology gave importance to: rational choice theory, the theory of experience exploration and criminological theory of psychoanalytic orientation.

One of these concepts is the theory of rational choice that explains human behaviour in terms of choice, where an offense is the result of reflections on the profits or losses of the behaviour. Another concept, C. Quay's theory of thrill seeking, which refers to the need of human stimulation and desire to raise the low cortical arousal through behaviour contrary to legal norms. According to the author of this theory, a child with hyperactive nervous system from an early age, staying in a family environ-

ment, is looking for ways to reduce the increased need for stimulation. When the child hits the unfavourable conditions of upbringing, such as prohibitions, imperatives made by parents or strong discipline which aims to inhibit the child's aspirations; in adolescence and then adulthood, they will be hostile and malicious towards its environment. As a result, they reveal a tendency to commit crimes [3, 9, 12, 13].

The third theory refers to the most general assumptions of Z. Freud, according to which a child in the early developmental period reveals an innate hostility and self-centeredness. This period is associated with the need to obtain gratification of primordial instincts, as well as the necessity to meet the needs. Negative experiences at this time may inhibit further development and make the child antisocial, hostile and self-centered. The application of psychoanalysis was firstly proposed by A. Aichhorn, then Alexander F. and D. Dixon, who refers to guilt. D. Dixon claimed that „(...) *overly lenient or excessively harsh father is often the cardinal cause of, damage to the ego, which involves an unconscious desire to punish oneself (...)* Among such people crime is a symptom of of the interpsychic conflict and the punishment only increases criminal tendency”[11]. Guilt is interpreted as a stimulus for criminal activities and punishment is a measure to eradicate them. According to the psychoanalysts, there is also another group of people among the criminals: narcissistic, not feeling remorse, with a minimum level of guilt. These are people who experienced loneliness, too much independence and insolation in childhood - usually at a very early stage.

Modern concepts of crime also refer to W.C. Reckless's control theory and to J.B. Rotter's theory of control placement. According to the first researcher, a person is exposed to criminal behaviour through motives, views, opinions, attitudes, fears, anxieties, strong opposition to authority, the need of immediate gratification, aggression or behavioural patterns and norms that set the legal and socially



approved way to succeed, meet the needs, hopes and aspirations. Control systems, placed inside or outside the unit, determine whether a man embarks on criminal activity path. Self-control consists of: resistance to frustration, adequate self-image, identification with legal and moral norms, aiming at project completion with clearly formulated life goals and a realistic level of aspiration - in relation to one's capabilities [20].

### 3.3. Sociological theories of crime

From a sociological point of view criminal behaviour is explained by factors that are placed outside the person. This group includes deviance theory made by F. Znaniecki, E. Durkheim and E.H. Sutherland and T. Hirschi. The first theory relates to the method and the quality of internalization of existing rules and standards in the society. Another concept of anomie is associated with the collapse of social structure and allowing lack of control on the part of society which causes a kind of loosening of social relations, while negating the existing social norms. E.H. Sutherland's theory of diverse links and T. Hirschi's theory of social control refer to the role of contacts and ties between the individual and the family, school or positive social group for the prevention of manifestations of anti-social behaviour. Theories of stigmatization (primary and secondary deviance) explain behaviour as thoughtless, understood as learned in childhood, even performed in an automatic manner, thoughtful and calculated at the level of possible profits and losses, induced by the standards and principles. Values, requirements and pressure from various groups remain in conflict with each other which results in the appearance of deviant behaviour (as a resultant of the above-mentioned pressures) [12].

### 3.4. Family and crime

Many years ago it was understood that young person's criminal behaviour to some extent could be affected by their family. The study which was carried out in this field showed natural predisposition of the individual and the role of family factors in

explaining the problem of crime. The analysis of the characteristics of educational systems in the family can bring numerous incentives to work with a family which is seen as dysfunctional. Studies show that there is a link between certain styles of education and behaviour in the circle of crime [23, 43].

Farrington showed that the way in which the family functions influences whether a person enters the criminal path to a great extent [19]. Factors that influence it are: siblings showing abnormal behaviour, poverty, inadequate educational methods and styles of parenting, as well as the separation of the child from their parents at the age of 8 to 10 years. In order to take preventive actions it should be understood how selected factors affect the appearance of a child's tendency to criminal behaviour. They are mainly described through terminology from the area of sciences such as sociology and psychology. It is assumed that a child learns certain behaviours during the modeling process, through numerous observations or as a result of dysfunctional, abnormal compounds in the family system. It is also stressed that the development of child's personality which shapes in the wrong direction is associated with the formation of bonds and disturbed relationship between the parent and child. The family has a significant impact on the shape and structure of child's personality. This means that all sorts of disturbances and deviations in terms of its functioning find their repercussions in child's behaviour, as well as in the expression of the attitudes of it. The so-called loosening of the emotional bond between the child and the parent very often is a source of hostility or antisocial aggression [30]. Children who were raised by their guardians in a raw way are characterized by problems in creating a stable, non-violent relationships with other adults. The notion to assume that children learn antisocial behaviour by observing anti-social behaviour of their parents is fully justified. At the same time the influence of siblings, especially juvenile offenders on the other children in the family system is observed - it may also be due to the effect of modeling [22]. It was found



that children learn aggression, above all in the family home, in a group of peers, school and mass media [39]. Parenting skills which are understood as a conscious differentiation of appropriate and inappropriate educational methods should be emphasized. The literature indicates that parents of criminals do not have the ability to guard their children, are not sensitive to encourage and reward appropriately the behaviour of a pro-social circle, do not respond to the needs of their children. They often react in a way unclear for their children and unconsequently. They do not have the ability to cope with emergencies and those situations that require conflict resolution, they neglect establishing clear rules of engagement with their child and introduce strict discipline that often is inconsistent.

## SUMMARY

This article attempts to analyze the characteristics of families of minors from the perspective of their dysfunctionality. Presented theoretical interpretations allow the reader to identify specific risk factors in the family environment of a juvenile offender.

Understanding the characteristics of family systems of young people that manifest criminal behaviour appears to be important from the point of view of improving the efficiency of corrective and educational interactions and the therapeutic process of rehabilitation. Appropriate identification of areas in which there are some disturbances could provide specialist help to young offenders' families.

In order to achieve optimum results of the assistance to socially maladjusted people, not only the dysfunctionality of the individual but also of the entire family system should be taken into account. The authors suggest a comprehensive model of work based on the several stages: diagnosis, designing interaction, implementation, forecast and evaluation. Furthermore, it has to be acknowledged that there is an important need for a system cooperation between the family and the institutions of social life, with particular emphasis on the role and importance of school as a place of education and upbringing of the child, social welfare institutions, NGOs, probation and expert assistance in the field of environmental support, psychotherapy and psychiatry.

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Corresponding author mgr Marta Pięta, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gdańsk, Poland; e-mail: [martapieta@o2.pl](mailto:martapieta@o2.pl)

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