



Foster parenting in old age as a crisis. Baseline hope, generalised self-efficacy, and positive orientation of foster parents in late adulthood¹

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Abstract: This article presents the results of a self-reported study showing differences in levels of baseline hope, generalised self-efficacy, and positive orientation depending on the role of a foster parent for their grandchildren. The Basic Hope Questionnaire (BHI-12), the Generalised Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES), the Positive Orientation Scale (P-Scale), and a self-report questionnaire were used. A total of 160 participants took part in the study. The study group consisted of 80 foster parents in late adulthood. The control group consisted of 80 older people who were not fulfilling this function. Statistical analysis showed statistically significant differences in the levels of all variables examined. It appeared that foster parents were characterised by higher levels of baseline hope (the effect was strong), higher levels of generalised self-efficacy, and lower levels of positive orientation. For the last variable, the effect was very strong. On this basis, it can be concluded that older people acting as foster parents, in the situation of a crisis occurring in the family, consisting of the breakdown of the previous way of functioning of the family and having a sense of self-efficacy and belief in the possibility of building a new order, i.e., strong basic hope, decide to take over the care of grandchildren. At the same time, the results of the research in terms of positive orientation indicate that this is a difficult situation for them related to their experience of less satisfaction with themselves and their lives. Foster parenting in late adulthood is portrayed as a difficult situation in which the family and human life cycle are disrupted. The psychological situation of older people acting as foster parents for their grandchildren is of particular interest, as the natural developmental crisis resulting from the ageing process is compounded by the additional situational crisis of minors losing the care of their biological parents and grandparents taking over this responsibility.

Keywords: baseline hope, positive orientation, generalised self-efficacy, foster parenting, crisis

1. Foster parenting in old age as a crisis

The family constitutes the primary and at the same time the most important upbringing environment, which shapes feelings and attitudes and exerts a significant influence on the formation of a system of values, norms, and patterns of behaviour (Walęcka-Matyja, 2015). In the situation of a crisis occurring in the generational family, when the family system does not properly fulfil its obligations and does not adequately meet the needs of the children functioning in it, it may lead to the placement of a minor in a foster family, which takes over tasks largely overlapping with those of the biological family (Dziennik Ustaw, 2011, no. 149, item 887).

Thus, it can be said that a foster family is a family that raises children whose parents are deceased or unable to raise them (Okoń, 2017).

The issue of foster parenthood and the question of taking care of minors who have lost parental care for various reasons are constantly topical and in need of attention, as indicated by the data presented by the Główny Urząd Statystyczny (*Central Statistical Office*), which shows that at the end of 2022, there were 72,800 children in foster care who were totally or partially deprived of the care of their natural family. Compared to 2021, the number of children in foster care increased by 0.7 percent (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2022), which does not give cause for joy. A specific feature of the foster care system in Poland is the clear

¹ Article in polish language: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2024-1Kard.pdf>

dominance of foster families related to the child. In 2022, among foster families, related families accounted for 64.1%, non-professional families for 30.1%, and professional families for 5.8% (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2022). According to the currently in force Act on Family Support and the Foster Care System, foster families related to a child can only be created by ascendants, i.e., by grandparents and great-grandparents or siblings (Dziennik Ustaw, 2011, No. 149, item 887). Data from the Central Statistical Office shows that 52.8 percent of those acting as foster families were aged 51-70 (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2022), indicating the advanced age of carers and the dominance of foster families created by grandparents. This situation is unlikely to change, as the development of foster care in Europe is moving in the direction of expanding forms of care in closer and extended family, i.e., keeping the child in a kinship family, which is in line with the idea of the community-based approach to childcare, which postulates that the focus should be on discovering the resources present in the family (Ruszkowska, 2013). The takeover of care by grandparents seems to be the least drastic solution, which ensures continuity of care and preservation of family ties while protecting against neglect (Ruszkowska, 2013; Winogrodzka, 2007).

There are a number of studies conducted in different countries comparing the functioning of related and unrelated foster families with the child (Burgess, Rossvoll, Wallace, Daniel, 2010; Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaellie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, Andries, 2012). An example is the research in the United States, which shows that foster parents related to the child compared to unrelated parents are older, have less education, and have greater financial difficulties (Metzger, 2008). Also noteworthy is Farmer's (2009) research, which analysed the specific characteristics of these two types of foster families. Carers from related foster families were shown to be more involved in the care and upbringing of their wards, to feel more satisfaction with their relationships with their children, and to be more satisfied with them compared to unrelated foster parents. Rel-

atives, however, signalled higher levels of stress, which may be related to stressors such as health or financial difficulties.

Taking on the role of a foster parent in late adulthood is undoubtedly a difficult situation. It can be assumed that the tasks of raising grandchildren imposed on older people sometimes interfere with the age-based right to rest and may hinder the process of coping with the crisis of old age and disrupt the fulfilment of tasks characteristic of this stage of life. Despite the fact that old age is the last phase of development in the human life cycle and may be associated with peace and stagnation, it is not without challenges and difficult situations that can lead to crises (Olszewski, 1998).

"A crisis is a state of disorganisation in which a person faces the nullification of important life goals or a profound disruption of his or her life cycle and methods of coping with stress factors" (Szatur-Jaworska, Błędowski, Dzięgielewska, 2006, p. 65). Crises due to the causes and content of experiences are divided into developmental and situational crises (Studen, 2006). According to Erikson's concept of psychosocial development, in late adulthood there is a developmental crisis of integrity vs. despair (Erikson, 2002). A positively resolved crisis of old age leads to a sense of inner integrity, which manifests itself in kindness towards others, high self-esteem, satisfaction with one's current life, a positive assessment of one's past life, coming to terms with the inevitability of death, curiosity about the world, and a willingness to share one's own thoughts and experiences with younger people (Brzezińska, Appelt, Ziółkowska, 2016). The unresolved crisis of this period leads to despair and is associated with the inability to come to terms with the fact of the approaching end of life and feelings of regret for missed or lost opportunities, as well as the dominance of a sense of bitterness, pessimism, and resistance to change (Brzezińska, Hejmanowski, 2016).

Situational crises, on the other hand, refer to random events. In old age, people are exposed to numerous stressors that can cause distress and impede the adaptation process. It is a fact that seniors experience more loss events than younger people (Kuryś-Szyncel, 2017). It is rarely the case

that they occur one at a time. They are very likely to accumulate during this period. The most common critical events in old age include: loss of loved ones, loss of health, loss of economic and social status, loss of prestige and usefulness, and also facing the prospect of approaching the end of life (Straś-Romanowska, 2009).

Steuden (2016) divided these difficulties into several groups related to:

- financial situation, locomotion, daily household duties;
- the acquisition of new skills needed to operate technical equipment;
- changes in relationships with the family and immediate environment;
- a change of residence due to financial or health reasons;
- negative self-assessment, negative self-esteem, lack of acceptance;
- negative life events (death of a loved one, deterioration of health).

The statistics presented at the beginning of this article show the scale of the phenomenon of older people taking over the care of their grandchildren and confirm the validity of conducting research in this area, taking into account the perspective of foster parents and the way they experience this difficult and demanding role. The psychological situation of older people acting as foster parents for their grandchildren seems to be of particular interest, as the natural developmental crisis resulting from the ageing process is compounded by the additional situational crisis of children losing the care of their biological parents and grandparents taking over this responsibility. In this case, therefore, there is a disruption to the family and human life cycle, which certainly has specific consequences for the functioning of the group of seniors discussed here. The question that arises, which is analysed in this article, is therefore the relevance of the function of the foster parent for the process of adaptation to old age, which is expressed in the level of positive orientation, and the resources for coping with a difficult situation, such as basic hope and a sense of generalised self-efficacy.

2. Baseline hope, generalised self-efficacy, and positive orientation- characteristics of the variables studied

2.1. Basic hope

The concept of basic hope was introduced by Erikson (2002), who hypothesised that it is formed in the early developmental stages as part of the building of family bonds. The author identifies the experience of repetition and predictability of events and the satisfaction of the child's needs by the environment as necessary conditions for the development of strong basic hope.

According to this concept, basic hope is an individual's deep-seated, generalised conviction that the world is orderly, meaningful, and fundamentally favourable to people. It is an assumption about the regularity and purposefulness of certain phenomena occurring in the world and, consequently, the purposefulness of the world as a whole. These beliefs are part of an individual's worldview, providing a basis for interpreting future events. Basic hope is described as a relatively stable personality structure, which is the basis for the individual's constructive response to new situations and circumstances following the breakdown of the previous order. The greater, the more certain the individual's subjective beliefs about the sensible and positive nature of the real world are (Trzebiński, Zięba, 2003a).

The results of ongoing research indicate the numerous psychological benefits of baseline hope. Research shows that the level of baseline hope is significant in shaping adaptation to irreversible loss and in mobilising the individual to create and seek new life challenges (Byra, 2014). In addition, people with strong basic hope go through the process of accepting loss more quickly, showing a higher readiness to construct an alternative order of their own existence, are more satisfied with their lives, and experience more positive emotions (Trzebiński, Zięba, 2003a). They are characterised by higher psychological well-being, life satisfaction, and a positive mood (Krok, 2013). Basic hope is positively associated with openness to experience, fosters forgiveness of experienced wrongs, and experiences gratitude for goodness and help received (Gruszecka, Trzebinski, 2012).

Basic hope is therefore a particularly valuable personal resource in late adulthood, conducive to coping with the many losses experienced during this period of life and, in the case of foster parents, to resolving the crisis in the family system.

2.2. Perceived self-efficacy

The creator of the concept of perceived self-efficacy is A. Bandura (1977, after Juczyński, 2000), who assumed that its level is related to the motivation to act. According to social cognitive theory, human behaviour is driven by expectations regarding the situation, the outcome of the action, and self-efficacy. The expectation of self-efficacy concerns the behaviour itself and is part of the control of personal action (Bandura, 2007). A sense of self-efficacy is, therefore, an individual's belief that he or she can successfully perform the actions necessary to achieve the desired outcome in a specific life situation (Heszen, Sęk, 2007; Juczyński, 2009).

Research shows that a high sense of self-efficacy is associated with mobilisation for action, readiness to invest energy, perseverance, the ability to overcome obstacles, and well-being (Oleś, 2009). In contrast, low self-efficacy is associated with experiencing helplessness, anxiety, sadness, and depression. In such individuals, a potential obstacle is perceived as exceeding the ability to cope with it, which consequently leads to withdrawal and resignation from action (Heszen, Sęk, 2007; Juczyński, 2009; Poprawa, 2001). Individuals with a high sense of self-efficacy show stronger motivation to undertake different behaviours, to continue them despite difficulties, and to maintain efforts to complete the action. Such individuals cope more effectively in stressful situations, showing lower ratings of stress intensity, weaker physiological indicators of stress, and proactive coping (Brzezińska, 2011; Pervin, John, 2002). It can therefore be concluded that self-efficacy, understood as a relatively stable and generalised belief that one has the resources to cope with various difficult situations in late adulthood, is conducive to effective coping with the crisis of old age and the challenge of caring for grandchildren in late adulthood.

2.3. Positive orientation

The concept of positive orientation was created by G.V. Caprara in 2009 (Caprara, 2009). He defines it as a basic personality trait that is a stable characteristic reflecting a general tendency to perceive various life experiences in a positive way (Caprara, 2009; Caprara et al., 2012). It signifies an individual's natural tendency towards a favourable evaluation of oneself, high satisfaction with life, and a high evaluation of the chances of achieving goals, which translates into commitment to life pursuits and a high evaluation of quality of life (Laguna, Oleś, Filipiuk, 2011). In this understanding, positive orientation is treated as an innate, genetically determined disposition that is responsible for an individual's adaptive functioning. The basic assumption of the theory is that "perceiving oneself, life, and the future in a positive way testifies to a basic predisposition that performs an important biological function – making a person inclined to cope with life despite failures, adversity, and the prospect of death. Such an outlook on reality is needed by people in order to develop and to take care of life despite the inevitability of its end." (Sobol-Kwapińska, 2014, p. 78). This variable is particularly interesting because it combines three components: self-esteem, optimism, and satisfaction with life (Laguna et al., 2011; Sobol-Kwapińska, 2014). Positive orientation is related to enjoyment of life and awareness of the meaning of life and is the opposite of the depressive triad, according to Beck.

A person's belief that he or she is worthy of respect, that life is worthwhile, and that the future is promising allows him or her to cope with loss, which is particularly important in old age when there is an accumulation of loss-type events. This article assumes that the level of positive orientation will reflect the level of adaptation of older people serving as foster parents.

3. Methodological assumptions of our own research

3.1. Objectives and research methods

This article presents the results of our own research on the difference in levels of baseline hope, generalised self-efficacy, and positive orientation depending on the role of the foster parent. The results presented here are only part of a larger research project dedicated to analysing the psychosocial functioning of older people in the role of foster parents. The interested reader is referred to the publication *Bilans zysków i strat a wybrane zasoby osobiste rodziców zastępczych u progu starości. Aspekty psychologiczno-pedagogiczne (The balance of gains and losses and selected personal resources of foster parents at the threshold of old age. Psychological and pedagogical aspects)* (Kardaś-Grodzicka, 2020).

The findings contained in the study are concerned with seeking an answer to the research question posed: does the function of a foster parent in late adulthood differentiate levels of baseline hope, generalised self-efficacy, and positive orientation? Based on this, the following research hypothesis was formulated: older people serving as foster parents differ in their levels of baseline hope, generalised self-efficacy, and positive orientation from people in late adulthood who do not fulfil this function. The Student's t-test for independent samples was used to analyse differences in the aforementioned variables. The following research methods were used in the study:

1. Basic Hope Questionnaire (BHI-12) J. Trzebiński, M. Zięba. It is a self-report tool used to measure the level of basic hope, understood as a person's conviction that the world is ordered and meaningful and that it is favourable to people (Trzebiński, Zięba, 2003b). The questionnaire consists of 12 statements. The respondent indicates to what extent he or she agrees with each statement using a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The score is the total score, which is an indicator of the overall level of basic hope. The higher the index, the

stronger the baseline hope. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency index is 0.70. The stability of the tool, as measured by r-Pearson, is 0.62.

2. Positive Orientation Scale (P Scale): M. Laguna, P. Oleś, D. Filipiuk. It is a short method for measuring positive orientation, constructed by Caprara and colleagues (2012) and adapted in Poland by Laguna, Oleś, and Filipiuk (2011). It represents a higher-order latent variable combining three components: self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction (Caprara, 2009). The scale is constructed of eight statements, all of which are diagnostic in nature. The score is the sum of the scores; the higher it is, the higher the level of positive orientation (Laguna et al., 2011).
3. Generalised Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) by R. Schwarzer, M. Jerusalem, in the Polish adaptation by Z. Juczyński (2009). It examines the strength of an individual's general beliefs in expressing his or her conviction about coping with difficult situations and obstacles. It is designed to test healthy and sick people. It consists of 10 statements comprising a single factor. For each question, the respondent has the opportunity to choose four answers: from no, for which he or she receives 1 point, to yes, for which he or she receives 4 points. The sum of all the scores gives an overall self-efficacy index, which can range from 10 to 40 points. The higher the score, the higher the sense of self-efficacy. The average Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.85. The reliability of the scale assessed in a group of 85 people using the test-retest method (after 5 weeks) was 0.78. The accuracy of the scale was assessed by comparing the results of the 496-person group with results obtained using other methods (Juczyński, 1997). The average score for the whole group was 27.32, similar to the average score of the original version.

3.2. Characteristics of the groups studied

It was decided to include people in late adulthood acting as foster parents for their grandchildren in the study. Only carers from foster families related

Table 1. Analysis of the gender frequency of the subjects in both groups

		frequency	percentage
Test group	female	48	60.0
	male	32	40.0
	total	80	100.0
Control group	female	50	62.5
	male	30	37.5
	total	80	100.0

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the age of the subjects in both groups

		M	SD	Mdn
Age	Test group	67.03	3.83	67.00
	Control group	68.04	3.42	67.50

to the child were therefore eligible for the study. The lower age limit was set at 60 years. The upper age limit was 75 years.

Due to the age of the subjects, the surveys were carried out individually and included an interview with the subject and an explanation of the questionnaire instructions. The respondents' answers were then entered into a database and statistically analysed.

A total of 160 older people participated in the study. The study group consisted of 80 people in late adulthood acting as foster parents for their grandchildren, including 48 women (60%) and 32 men (40%). The control group consisted of 80 people in late adulthood not acting as foster parents, including 50 women (62.5%) and 30 men (37.5%).

The age of the people in the study group ranged from 62 to 75 years, and the average age for this group was 67 years. In contrast, in the control group, the youngest person tested was 61 years old, the oldest was 74 years old, and the average age for this group was 68 years old.

4. Baseline hope, positive orientation, and generalised self-efficacy of foster parents in old age: research findings

The first variable analysed was baseline hope. Statistical analysis showed that the two study groups differed significantly on this variable: $t(133.32) = 12.402$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [7.270; 10.030]; $d = 1.961$. The effect obtained is strong. Those in the study group scored statistically significantly higher on the baseline hope scale ($M = 29.95$; $SD = 3.33$) than those in the control group ($M = 21.30$; $SD = 5.28$). The result means that older people who act as foster parents for their grandchildren are characterised by a stronger baseline of hope than other older people. A graphical presentation of the results is provided in Figure 1.

Another analysis of the significance of differences concerned the sense of generalised self-efficacy. In this case, a statistically significant difference was also obtained between the groups: $t(158) = 2.046$; $p < 0.05$; 95% CI [0.053; 3.022]; $d = 0.324$. On average, subjects in the study group scored higher for self-efficacy ($M = 31.75$; $SD = 4.35$) than those in the control group ($M = 30.21$; $SD = 5.12$). However, the strength of this effect is weak. This means that foster parents in late adulthood are characterised by a higher sense of generalised self-efficacy than other older people. A graphical presentation of the results is provided in Figure 2.

The last variable analysed was positive orientation. In this case, a statistically significant difference was obtained between the study groups: $t(143.22) = 11.758$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI [-7.899; -5.626]; $d = 1.859$. The study group consisting of those acting as surrogate parents in late adulthood had a significantly lower positive orientation ($M = 29.10$; $SD = 4.18$) than the control group ($M = 35.86$; $SD = 3.00$). This effect is very strong, implying that serving as a foster parent in late adulthood strongly differentiates the level of positive orientation compared to those who do not serve in such a role. Graphically, the positive orientation values in both groups are illustrated in Figure 3.

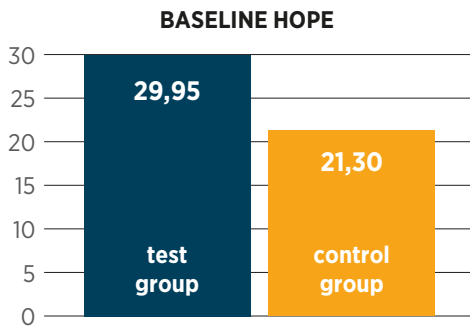


Figure 1. Older adults' level of baseline hope according to their role as a foster parent.

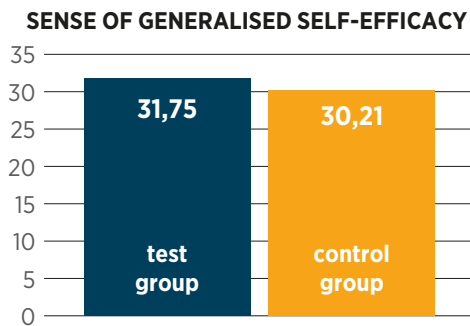


Figure 2. sense of generalised self-efficacy in older people according to their role as foster parents.

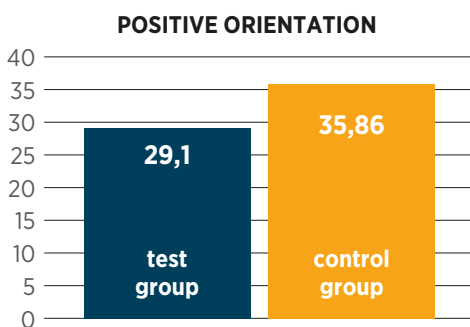


Figure 3: Older adults' level of positive orientation according to their role as a foster parent.

Discussion and Conclusions

The statistical analysis presented above showed differences in all the variables studied. The author's assumption that older people who take on the role of foster parents for their grandchildren are a specifically functioning group of seniors was therefore confirmed. They are people with personal resources that help them take on this very demanding role. At the same time, they find the situation challenging, a difficulty involving the experience of less satisfaction and contentment with life.

The results indicate that foster parents are characterised by stronger basic hope and a sense of generalised self-efficacy than other older people. On this basis, it can be concluded that seniors taking on the care of their grandchildren in difficult situations are able to respond constructively, cope effectively with stress, and use problem-oriented strategies. It can be assumed that these characteristics make them take responsibility for solving the problem when a serious crisis occurs in the family system, involving the destabilisation of the previous organisation of family life, and they courageously decide to take on the challenge of creating a foster family. In this difficult situation, in order to save their children from losing their family and ending up in the institutional care system, they bring order to the chaos, create a new order, take on new roles, and organise life anew. This may indicate their flexibility and active coping with difficult situations. Research has shown that people with strong basic hope are more open to experience, more easily forgive wrongs suffered by others, and are grateful for the good they have received (Gruszecka, Trzebiński, 2012). It can be concluded that these are traits that facilitate the process of adaptation to change. On the other hand, a strong sense of generalised self-efficacy is correlated with stronger motivation, consistency in action (Brzezińska, 2011; Oleś, 2009), and proactive coping when experiencing stress (Pervin, John, 2002).

Another statistical analysis showed that seniors serving as foster parents are characterised by a lower level of positive orientation, meaning that they are less satisfied with their lives than seniors

who do not fulfil this function. It can be assumed that family problems resulting in children being placed in the foster care system, daily difficulties related to caring for grandchildren, lack of time for leisure activities, and fulfilment of one's own needs and interests may be related to lower life satisfaction and contentment in people in the study group. Positive orientation is largely responsible for adaptive functioning because it is associated with favourable self-esteem, high life satisfaction, and a high assessment of quality of life (Laguna et al., 2011; Sobol-Kwapińska, 2014). Thus, it is an important resource that promotes adaptation to old age and, at the same time, reflects the level of adaptation to this period of life. This result may suggest that foster parents in late adulthood, assuming an age-inappropriate role, experience a crisis related to their inability to fulfil the natural needs assigned to the life stage they are in.

In conclusion, it can be said that the function of a foster parent in late adulthood is a difficult, burdening situation associated with the disruption of the human life cycle. This unique group of seniors repeats developmental tasks from another stage of life, which may hinder the process of adaptation to old age and exacerbate the natural crisis of adjustment to changes in this period of life. It should be noted that there is a lack of comparative research in the literature to which the results obtained can be related, as no similar studies of foster parents have been conducted to date on the variables studied. The results obtained provide a valuable resource for practitioners working with related foster parents in late adulthood, showing the perspective of this group of seniors. For them, taking on the care of their grandchildren is a major challenge that requires understanding, care, and the provision of appropriate support from the institutions called upon to do so.

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