

(IN)ADAPTATION TO ADVERSITY: a study about parental care deprivation in a group of adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

This study falls within the conceptual frame of Development Psychopathology. According to this recent study area, a diversity of development paths can lead to the same result. Moreover, the same development line, related to subsequent processes and experiences, can lead to different patterns of adjustment or maladjustment. So, it is clear that not all subjects running risks come to develop psychosocial problems and that no one is completely free from an maladjustment development.

These contexts show that both the presence and absence of family can turn into an extremely important factor for children's and adolescents' development process. They presuppose that children's and adolescents' development in an institution is not the same as in the family.

Although we know that institutional care has negative effects on development, the nature and quantity of those effects are not clear yet.

AIMS

General aim: to examine, at different levels, the psychosocial adaptation and the inter-individual differences of a group of adolescents deprived of parental care and institutionalised so as to contribute to our knowledge of the phenomenon of institutionalisation during adolescence.

- ▶ First: to provide a social and demographic characterisation of a sample of institutionalised adolescents, trying to find possible differences associated to gender.
- ▶ Second: to determine if adolescents deprived of parental care actually run the risk of maladjustment according to variables like school performance, attachment strategies, self-esteem, behaviour and intelligence, which is quite natural due to the fact that they are deprived of the familiar environment and because the adverse situations they went through during their developmental process contributed to their placement in an institution.
- ▶ Third: to examine the relationship among the following: attachment strategies, self-esteem, school performance, behaviour in the institution and at school, verbal and non-verbal intelligence.
- ▶ Fourth: to analyse possible differences related to school performance, self-esteem, behaviour at school, verbal and non-verbal intelligence in terms of type of behaviour in the institution.
- ▶ Fifth: to identify different groups of adolescents on the basis of profiles of psychosocial adaptability defined through the similarity as to the following characteristics: school performance, self-esteem, behaviour in the institution and at school, verbal and non-verbal intelligence.

METHOD

Participants

- ▶ N = 47
- ▶ Boys and girls
- ▶ Age from 11 to 15
- ▶ Residents in three institutions in Portugal's Central Region
- ▶ Students of the second and third cycles of Primary School

Materials

- ▶ Questionnaire to the Institution Director
- ▶ Questionnaire to the Nursery School Teachers
- ▶ Self-Assessment Questionnaire
- ▶ Official document containing the students' grades
- ▶ Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) – (Almeida, 1997)
- ▶ Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC)
- ▶ Behaviour Questionnaire to the Class Tutor
- ▶ Collective Scale of Intellectual Level
- ▶ Tests Battery of Differential Thinking

RESULTS

Presentation and discussion

- ✓ There were statistically significant differences between boys and girls that revealed that girls show a higher degree of adaptation than boys. For example, they maintain a more positive relationship with family; they are better adjusted to the institution; they establish a closer relationship with their tutor in the institution, and they do not usually fail any years at school.
- ✓ we concluded that most of the adolescents are adjusted to the variables: school performance, attachment, self-esteem, school and institutional behaviour.
- ✓ the distribution of the adolescents through the attachment strategies according to their level of self-esteem did not reveal statistically significant differences.
- ✓ safe attachment strategies seem to be positively associated mainly to behaviour at school but also to the school performance and behaviour in the institution, although the differences found in these three last variables were not statistically significant.
- ✓ adolescents with low self-esteem achieve better levels of school performance and show a more adaptable behaviour in institutional and school contexts when they feel secure. Thus, safe attachment strategies can play a protective role.
- ✓ insecure adolescents show a more adjusted behaviour both in the institution and at school when they have higher values of self-esteem, which can be a sign of a possible protective effect of this variable.
- ✓ the results point towards a positive association between behaviour in the institution and the variables self-esteem and behaviour at school. Therefore, subjects showing a more adaptable behaviour in the institution present higher levels of self-esteem and behaviour at school.

Profiles of psychosocial adaptability

CLUSTER 1 (N=26) 16 boys and 10 girls 16 secures and 10 insecure	CLUSTER 2 (N=21) 6 boys and 15 girls 14 secures and 7 insecure
Lower self-esteem	Higher self-esteem
Less adaptable behaviour in the institution and at school	More adaptable behaviour in the institution and at school
Higher verbal intelligence	Lower verbal intelligence
Higher school performance	Lower school performance

Conclusion

The results of this study seem to suggest that there are inter-individual differences at the level of psychosocial adaptation of a group of adolescents deprived of parental care.

In spite of the negative situations these adolescents went through (family problems, separation from attachment subjects, and institutional placement) not all of them are vulnerable or run the risk of showing a maladjusted development, as more recent studies, dealing with a more optimistic perspective on the problem, reveal.

Practical implications

The results of our study are a good example of how a group of adolescents sharing a certain situation (*i.e.*, the institutional placement) can, at the same time, show inter-individual differences in terms of psychological "strengths" and "weaknesses". For this reason, researchers and technicians must be very careful not to base their idea of institutionalised adolescents on stereotypes, because these adolescents, though part of a group, are, above all, individuals.