

THE RELATION BETWEEN COPING MECHANISMS AND ATTACHMENT STYLES TO ADOLESCENTS

E. Demeter

Edgar DEMETER

Psychologist

Individual cabinet, Arad

Abstract: The abandonment, a problem that is known worldwide met an unprecedented explosion especially in poor countries and unclear political situations like Romania.

According to the specialty literature research a large number of studies regarding the development of abandoned children has been conducted in our country. The situations of children who come from disorganized families in Romania have considerably deteriorated while the number of abandoned children has progressively grown. Furthermore, the life conditions in orphanage institutions are sometimes insecure and do not answer the optimized developmental needs of the children. A series of studies that have been realized regarding the investigation of the causes that determined children to end up in such institutions refer to the abandonment and the children who come from unorganized families and who are confronting with several problems.

Among several disorders that can be found in children who are institutionalized there are also disorders of emotional attachment. Several studies regarding the three types of emotional attachment (secure, avoidant, anxious) have compared groups of children who were raised in orphanages and groups of children who were raised by their parents and the results pointed out the presence of meaningful differences for all types of emotional attachments, the children raised in orphanages being more avoidant, more anxious and feeling less secure unlike those raised by their parents. Furthermore the studies that investigated the groups of teenagers raised within families have discovered that the emotional engagement is positively related to anxiety and rage and the coping mechanism are less adaptive. Other studies have proven

the fact that those children who start their lives engaging a secure emotional commitment show a higher self-esteem and they are using positive coping mechanisms while those who engage a less secure emotional commitment are likely to show less capability to difficulties.

In the specialty literature there are to be found numerous studies that research similar concepts with those presented here, but none of them have spoken about the subject illustrated by this one. Therefore this study represents the occasion to contribute in a small manner to the knowledge of the presented problem and simultaneously a starting point for other studies.

Key words: emotional attachment, mechanism, coping, teenagers, stress, abandonment.

Theoretical aspects regarding the study

The stress

From the psychological point of view the stress is considered a subjectively perceived strong imbalance, between the imposed requests of the organism and the capacity to answer at the stimuli (Derevenco, Anghel, Băban, 1992, pag. 27).

For Selye, (1949, *apud* Luban – Plozza, Pozzi, Carlevaro, 2000, pag. 9), who integrated the term into the medical field, the stress is “the adaption program of the body to a new situation, the stereotypical and unspecified answer to the stimuli that perturb its personal imbalance.” Hereby the stress phenomenon indicates a psychosomatic mechanism whereby the human being reacts to the physical and mental efforts, tiredness, frustration, rage but especially to conflicts that take place within his small group: the family.

The concept of coping

The concept of coping represents the assembly of cognitive, behavioral and complex strategies that humans are using in the effort of canceling or diminishing the stressful effects of the life events towards them (Vaillant, 1992, *apud* Perciun, 2000, pag. 113).

Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, (*apud* Băban, 1998, pag. 49), defined the concept of coping as “the behavioral and cognitive effort to diminish, control or tolerate the extrinsic or intrinsic requests that surpass the private means.” This definition highlights four essential aspects of the coping mechanism: behavioral and cognitive part of the processes; the coping is always a transactional process between the person and the environment, therefore engages perpetual quantitative and qualitative

changes of this relation. The transactional relation between a person and the environment also assumes mutually conditioning between coping, evaluation and emotion. The process distinguishes between the adjustment mechanisms and innate adaptation mechanisms engaging the necessity of effort and also highlights the existence of the effective and less effective types of coping (Băban, 1998, pag. 49).

The process of coping gets through three stages: *the precognition* (or the anticipation) is when the situation can be postponed or prevented, when the person can prepare for the confrontation and can evaluate its cost; *the confrontation* (or the impact) when reevaluation, redefining the situation and answer takes place; and *post confrontation* when the personal significance of what happened is being analyzed. Repeatedly the moment of precognition is stronger than the confrontation when we refer to the psycho-physical reactions. This fact had determined the outline of the so-called *stress anticipation*. When there is no moment of anticipation the psycho-physical reactions can manifest after the confrontation (Lazarus, 1986, *apud* Băban, 1998, pag. 49-50).

Emotional attachment

The emotional attachment is an affective structure of a complex intercommunication in relation to a person (idea, ideology or group etc.). It contains strong emotional symbolic elements of great impact. Among people it can be mutual or unilateral. Furthermore it is obviously asymmetrical. The person who engages emotional attachment is dependent towards the other individual. The emotional attachment engages complex expressive behavior: the lack of interest, the desire of commitment, assurance and protection. The emotional attachment can be also oriented towards people without any expressive characteristics (Șchiopu, 1997, pag. 87).

According to Stroufe, Egeland, Carlson, Collins, 2005, (*apud* Muntean, 2006, pag 194) “the theory of emotional attachment is a developing and dynamic structured theory that allows unclear and nonlinear important predictions of successive adaptation that take place. The nonlinear development of the individual can be achieved according to the following principles: integration, self-organization, distinction.” The emotional attachment is a fundamental organizational system that determines the development and is the base of mental health.

Types of emotional attachment:

- *Type A behavior* (emotional attachment characterized by insecurity, anxiety and avoidance): The representative children of this category do not seem to be affected by the absence of their mother; they start to explore immediately the unknown environment, but when they are left with their maternal figure they either show a minimum answer or

the absence of it. Even in the absence of the figure they continue to explore the play room, and when they reunite the child avoids the parent returning to his toys. The continuous concentration of these children upon the physical environment can be considered a strategy to minimize the affective behavior.

- *Type B behavior* (the emotional attachment characterized by security): The representative children of this category impatiently explore the unknown environment in the presence of their maternal figure, but when the figure is absent they show signs of longing; they feel affected in their absence. When reunited these type of children look for closeness, interaction and physical contact, and soon they return to exploring the environment. They seem capable to find a balance between emotional attachment and exploring.

- *Type C behavior* (the emotional behavior characterized by insecurity – ambivalent): this category of children frequently feels fear once they enter the play room and they remain relatively uninterested about exploring. During the procedure of the unknown situation they seem preoccupied by the presence or absence of their maternal figure. When separated by their maternal figure they manifest distress and anxiety, being affected by the separation. When reunited they look for proximity but in the same time they keep distance to their maternal figure (they are ambivalent, simultaneously seeking but avoiding the physical contact with their mother). These children manifest stress till the end of the stressful situation procedure.

- *Type D behavior* (the emotional attachment characterized by the lack of organization and orientation): According to a research, Main and Solomon, 1986, (apud Birch, 2000, pag. 54), suggest that there is a fourth category, that is the type D category (the lack of organization and orientation). It has been noticeable that a small number of children didn't seem to have a coherent strategy to cope with the "unknown stress situation". Thus, their behavior is fully disorganized and disoriented and is characterized by incomplete moves and reactions sometimes discreet in relation to an unknown person or even to the mother.

Adolescence

The adolescence is a stage in life, a transitional period between childhood and adulthood that sums up more sub-stages: the preadolescence (from 14 till 16/18), the adolescence (from 16 till 20) and prolonged adolescence (from 18/20 till 25) that includes the young students as well as the integrated youngsters that are already part of the different forms of social-professional activity. Overall the adolescence is seen as an extremely rich ontogenetic development stage regarding the

psycho-behavioral pain of acquirments and changes. As a period between childhood and adulthood, it offers a dimensional behavioral and psychological profile, more precisely by the contradiction between the young adult status requested by the adolescent and the child status given constantly by the adults. Fundamentally some authors made reference to the so-called “*adolescent personality crisis phenomenon*” or “*originality crisis*” (Şchiopu, Verza, 198; Rousselet, 1969; Debesse, 1930, *apud* Mitrofan, N., Mitrofan, I., 1991, pag. 10).

The research methodology

The general objective

This study tries to find the possible existenting differences between adolescents who come from disorganized families and those who come from organized families regarding the level of coping mechanisms and emotional attachment styles.

Specific objectives

- Highlighting the differences between adolescents who come from disorganized families and those who come from organized families regarding the *coping mechanism*.
- Pointing out the differences between adolescents that come from disorganized families and those who come from organized families regarding the emotional attachment styles.
- Pointing out the differences between adolescents who come from disorganized families and those who come from organized families regarding their self-esteem.
- Highlighting the differences between adolescents who come from disorganized families and those who come from organized families regarding their emotional maturity level.

Applied hypotesis

- *Hypotesis 1.* There are significant differences between the adolescents who come from disorganized families and those who come from organized families regarding their emotional attachment styles.
- *Hypotesis 2.* The self-esteem presents a significantly lower level regarding those adolescents who come from disorganized families than those who come from organized families.
- *Hypotesis 3.* Statistics show that the emotional maturity stage regarding adolescents who come from disorganized families presents a significantly lower level than those who come from organized families.
- *Hypotesis 4.* Statistics show that there are significant differences regarding the *coping strategies* used between adolescents who

come from disorganized families from those who come from organized families.

Used methods

- *Friedman emotional maturity assessment questionnaire*
- *COPE - coping measurement process questionnaire*
- *Emotional attachment questionnaire*
- *Rosenberg self-esteem measurement scale*

The presentation of sample investigated

The examined group of the study contains 60 subjects who were equally divided into two groups. The first group assembles adolescents with the average age between 16 and 25 years with an average age equal to 19,4 years. The individuals from this group are institutionalised in the “Center for family and professional integration support for youth” in Timisoara and they willingly participated in this reasearch.

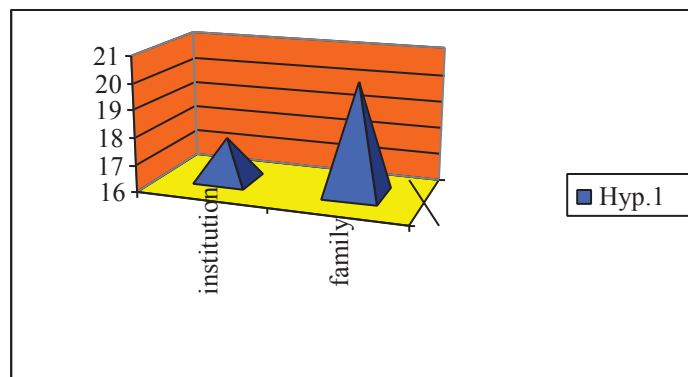
Regarding the second group, that contains adolescents with the average age between 16 and 25 with an average age equal to 19.33.

The design of the research

This study is non-experimental. More precisely, haveing regard to the formulation of the objectives and the hypotesis and to check if there are any differences or not regarding the coping mechanisms and emotional attachment styles between the two groups, it is necessary to achive a comparative study.

Results and discussions

5. The interpretation of hypotesis 1



Graphic no. 1 The difference between the two groups regarding the secure emotional attachment style

In order to see and understand the direction of the differences it is sufficient to notice the averages showed in graphic no 1. Thus, we will notice that the adolescents who come from disorganized families show a

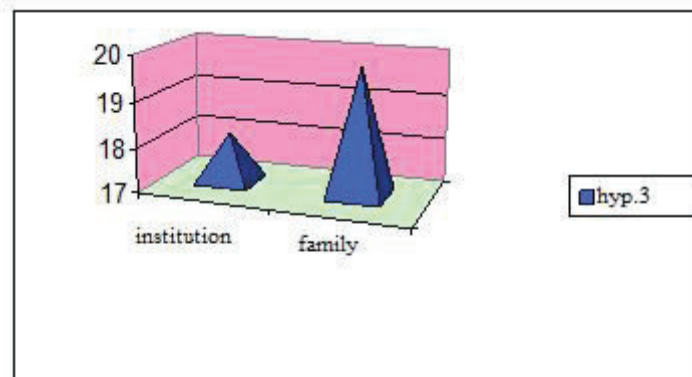
diminished emotional attachment style (17,66) than those who come from organized families(20,10).

Considering that significant differences for the research groups regarding the adolescents, the collected data support the first hypothesis. The adolescents who come from disorganized families obtained lower values than the second group, regarding the secure emotional attachment style.

6. *The interpretation of the second hypothesis (hypothesis no 2)*

The result is not statistically significant and thus the null hypothesis is not rejected. This means that the results obtained do not support the launched hypothesis, which is: *The self-esteem presents a significantly lower level regarding those adolescents who come from disorganized families than those who come from organized families.*

7. *The interpretation of the third hypothesis (hypothesis no 3)*



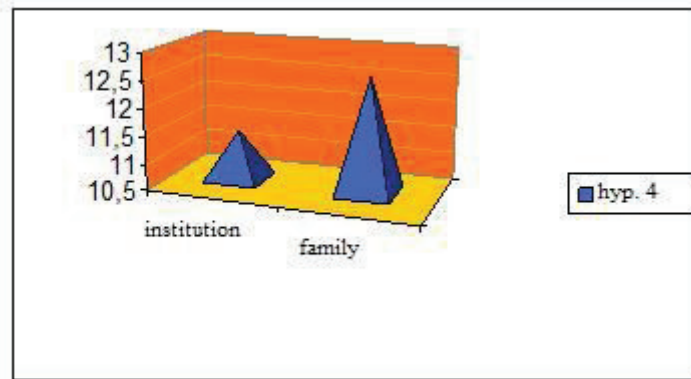
Graphic no. 2 The difference between the two groups regarding the emotional maturity level

Therefore, the third hypothesis claims that between the two categories of adolescents there are differences regarding the emotional maturity level. In order to notice the direction of the differences we will examine the averages presented in the second graphic. Thus, we will notice that adolescents who come from organized families show a higher emotional maturity level (19.88) than those who come from disorganized families (18,17).

As noticeable from the quantitative interpretation, the hypothesis regarding the “Statistics show that the emotional maturity stage regarding adolescents who come from disorganized families presents a significantly

lower level than those who come from organized families” is supported by the obtained data.

8. *The interpretation of the forth hypotesis (hypotesis no 4)*



Graphic no. 3 The difference between the two groups regarding the active coping

In order to see and understand the direction of the differences it is sufficient to notice the averages showed in the graphic no. 3. Thus, we notice that adolescents who come from disorganized families they tend to use less *active coping* in order to face stress(11,40) unlike the adolescents who come from organized families to whom a higher usage of the active coping is being noticed (12,63).

According to the quantitative data analyze it is noticeable that the hypotesis is valid and between the two groups of the adolescents there are differences regarding the active coping.

The studies performed on the adolescents suggest that a poor family cohesion is associated with certain symptom that indicates the presence of the stress. Thus, the level of family cohesion becomes a mental health predictor and also affects the risk for institutionalization.

Other studies underline that a higher stress among the adolescents is associated with less support from the group and less family cohesion. Thus, adolescents who come from institutions are likely to arise from families with financial or mental-emotional instability issues, all these determing factors assembling stress references.

Conclusions

The general objective of this reference is represented by the attempt to surprise if there are any differences between the group of adolescents who come from disorganized families and those who com from organized families regarding the coping mechanisms and the attachment styles.

After processing the statistical data as well as the interpretation of the qualitative and the quantitative results the following conclusions can be extracted:

Statistics show that there are significant differences between the two groups of adolescents regarding the secure emotional attachment style, the group of adolescents who come from organized families registering a higher average of this type of the attachment style (20,10), unlike the group of adolescents who come from disorganized families. The deprivation of affection and an organized family that is using some fundamental rules and principles, that offers trust and safety to children, it is possible that the children who come from disorganized families to develop a fear of abandonment, a fear that is more pregnant to them than to those who come from organized families; thus, this aspect explains the difference between the two groups regarding the secure emotional attachment style.

Additionally, the hypothesis stays on solid data and agrees with the speciality literature studies where often is mentioned that those adolescents who have grown into institutions are likely to develop an insecure emotional attachment style unlike those who have grown into organized families.

Concluding the data analysis regarding the coping mechanisms the following significant differences have been found: the active coping is more diminished regarding the adolescents who come from disorganized families (the average is 11,40) unlike those who come from organized families (12,63). The self-organization is also more diminished regarding adolescents who come from disorganized families (11,60) unlike those who come from organized families (12, 90).

These two coping strategies point out clear and useful actions that want to eliminate the stress factor, it refers to the organisation of useful steps and ways to improve and eliminate the problem. In general, the optimism, sociability, self-trust are associated in the speciality literature to adolescents who come from organized families and are likely to use those features when engaging the coping mechanism through direct actions unlike the adolescents who come from disorganized families.

Thus, there is the possibility for the adolescents who come from disorganized families to offer a socially desirable answer in order to shape a positive image in front of others.

There is a significant difference regarding the emotional maturity level between the two groups. Thus, the results show that adolescents who come from disorganized families register a more diminished level of the emotional maturity level (18,17) unlike the adolescents who come from organized families (19,88).

The speciality literature speaks about the importance of the family environment considering that the equilibrium and the stability offered to children will contribute to the harmonious development of their maturity. It is possible that the life events of the adolescents who come from a disorganized family, for instance the most painful one to be their family separation, can contribute to their emotional instability.

This study proves that children who grow within an organized family can develop more properly unlike those children who come from disorganised families and are sent to institutions, where the staff is constantly changing.

References:

- Băban, A. (1998), *Stres si personalitate*, Editura Presa Universitara Clujeană, Cluj – Napoca
- Birch, A. (2000), *Psihologia dezvoltării: din primul an de viață până în perioada adultă*, Editura Tehnică, București
- Derevenco, P., Anghel, I., Băban, A., (1992), *Stresul în sănătate și boală. De la teorie la practică*, Editura Dacia, Cluj – Napoca
- Luban–Plozza, B., Pozzi, U., Carlevaro, T., (2000), *Conviețuirea cu stresul. Strategii de înfrangere a anxietății*, Editura Medicală, București
- Mitrofan, I., Mitrofan, N., (1991), *Familia de la A...la Z. Mic dicționar al vieții de familie*, Editura Științifică, București
- Muntean, A., (2006), *Psihologia dezvoltării umane*, Editura Polirom, Iași
- Perciun, V., (2000), *Psihologie medicală*, Editura Eurostampa, Timișoara
- Șchiopu, U., (coord.), (1997), *Dicționar enciclopedic de psihologie*, Editura Babel, București