

## SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF INSTITUTIONALIZED ADOLESCENTS

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### **Abstract**

*In the present research, several social dynamics of institutionalized adolescents have been studied. In order to achieve this, the studied concepts were defined: aggressiveness (with its several forms), hostility and social anxiety. These dynamics have been studied by comparing a group of 30 institutionalized adolescents and a group of 30 adolescents who lived with their families. Significant differences have been found between the two groups from the point of view of the studied dynamics. Through the directions that it advanced, the study represents a start for a specialized intervention for the institutionalized teenagers.*

**Keywords: adolescent, aggressiveness, hostility, social anxiety**

The present article represents a part of a study finalized in a report from 2008, having as a subject „Social dynamics and somatization at institutionalized adolescents”. I have chosen this subject because I am interested in the problems encountered by teenagers who are in state care, especially their problems in relationship to others. Thus, I have tried to highlight aspects concerning aggressiveness, hostility and social anxiety, relevant themes for the concerned subject.

Starting from the idea that, being deprived from the warmth of a stable home and that of a family, the institutionalized adolescents are different from their peers who live with their families, I’ve tried to find significant differences between two groups’ participants to this study. One of the groups consisted of 30 adolescents from an orphanage and the other group of 30 adolescents who live with their families. The observation of the differences was oriented towards aggressiveness and its forms, as well as towards hostility. Moreover, I’ve tried to find if there is a connection, for the institutionalized adolescents, between social anxiety and indirect forms of aggressiveness.

The issue of institutionalized children requires a lot of attention, especially in our country, where the foster system has a lot of deficits, contributing to creating a gap between these adolescents and society, from the point of view of both a smooth social integration and of the access to a quality education. Most of these teenagers go to vocational schools, in order for them to have a profession, but nobody guarantees their success, especially if they have to leave the foster system at 18.

The peer reviewed literature, both international, as well as local, has focused more on describing the problems that these adolescents encounter. The present study wants to represent more than that, maybe a step towards understanding and supporting these adolescents, towards studying differences (if they exist) between them and adolescents who live with their families, towards a better and wider view of the difficulties in socialization of these adolescents.

### **Theoretical argument**

The present paper aims at examining the social difficulties which are encountered by institutionalized adolescents. From this point of view, I've chosen three dimensions: aggressiveness, hostility and social anxiety. These dimensions are relevant for this category of individuals, because they can represent consequences or effects of a life full of frustrations, which come mainly from the lack of family support. All these dimensions can be considered difficulties in social insertion of these adolescents, especially when they no longer benefit from state care. These social dynamics, in this category of adolescents, are studied in comparison with non-institutionalized adolescents. The main concepts of the study will be shortly described as following.

### **Aggressiveness**

A reality of our times, aggressiveness is manifested in all societies more and rougher. Defined as „any physical or verbal behavior manifested with intent to hurt someone” (Myers, 2000: 208), aggressiveness is a phenomenon which needs attention, because it has many forms and affects a lot of people. Another, more extensive, definition of the term sees aggressiveness as „a behavior which, intentionally hurts (physically or verbally) another person or damages a property (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, Bem, 2002: 515). I see this definition as being more complete, because it includes also aggressiveness manifested upon objects, as vandalism acts are.

Aggressiveness appears in all age categories under different forms. This phenomenon is interesting to be studied during adolescence, because in that period aggressiveness has higher rates of manifestation than previous ages (from 3.2% to 10%, apud Munteanu, 2003). Moreover, at this age the first delinquent and pre-delinquent behaviors begin to appear. A high number of criminals are from this age range, the majority of which come from risky environments, but there are also adolescents who come from families which are not marked but financial difficulties (ibidem). In adolescence, many behavioral problems can be explained by underlying aggressive tendencies. These behavioral problems with a hidden aggressive note are: running away from home, school failure, showing-off or risky behaviors (Larousse, 2007).

Another concept related to aggressiveness is that of **hostility**, a very interesting one. Hostility is an attitudinal, perceptive and emotional dimension of aggressiveness, which doesn't necessarily manifest in open behaviors (Kazdin, Rodgers, Colbus & Siegel, 1987). Hostility includes several components: the

emotional component, which refers to fury, the behavioral component, which involves verbal and physical aggressiveness, and the cognitive component, which involves negative thoughts and beliefs about human nature (Heponiemi, Ravaja, Elovainio, Keltikangas – Järvinen, 2007). Individuals who manifest high levels of hostility have difficulties in perceiving, processing and expressing emotion.

### **Factors of Aggressiveness**

Research shows that there are a lot of factors which contribute to adopting an aggressive behavior. They have been classified in many categories.

A first category is that of *individual factors*. They include the age of the individual, gender, culture and personal experience.

With regard to gender differences in aggressiveness, it is stated by several authors that male subjects are prone to manifesting an aggressive behavior much more often than female subjects (Munteanu, 2003). Despite this, there are no significant differences between boys and girls in adopting aggressive behavior. The significant difference is, however, in the type of aggressive behavior they choose. Thus, boys adopt physical aggressiveness behaviors (kicking, punching, pushing, etc.) and these behaviors are often encouraged by educators or parents, either through reward or through the fact that such behaviors remain without consequence (Malim, 2003, Ranschburg, 1979). Girls, however, manifest verbal aggressiveness more (yelling, crying) (Ranschburg, 1979). Baron and Byrne (1991, *apud* Neculau, 2003) have shown that, in fact, gender differences in aggressive behaviors depend very much on the gender roles the individuals adopt, as well as on practices used in socializing them.

With regard to the age of the individual as factor of aggressiveness, it appears that aggressive tendencies appear from age 1- 1.5 years old, and they have multiple, masked, symbolic forms, as being grumpy, motor and verbal resistance, if parents don't tolerate direct aggressive behaviors. As mentioned above, adolescence is the age in which a growth in aggressive behaviors frequencies and levels appears (Munteanu, 2003).

A second category of factors consists of *environmental factors* (Malim, 2003, Neculau, 2003). In this category we can find factors which come from the family environment and ambient factors. Regarding the factors which refer to the *family environment*, it has been demonstrated that in families, aggressive behaviors are promoted through beatings and incest, the main aggressive behaviors from parents to children. Parents who punish physically often or who abuse their children often, might also have been abused and physically punished as children by their own parents (Gelles, 1973, *apud* Neculau, 2003). Also, other studies have shown that those children whose parents use physical punishment more have a tendency of using aggressiveness in their social interactions, this fact being supported by the theory of social learning: if a child sees aggressive models he will probably engage more easily in aggressive behaviors (Bandura & Walters, 1959; Straus & Gelles, 1980, *apud* Myers, 2000). Children who act aggressively are usually taught by their parents to behave like this during their socialization process

(Patterson, 1982, *apud* Myers, 2000). The psychological control of parents towards their children can lead to social aggressiveness (a form of aggressiveness that means harming another, destroying another's self-esteem social status, as stated by Galen și Underwood, 1997, *apud* Loukas, Paulos & Robinson, 2003). This control, exercised by some parents, is based on hidden behaviors and is characterized by manipulation in the parent-child interaction (Morris *et al.*, 2002, *apud* Loukas *et al.*, 2003), as social aggressiveness, which is a masked form aggressiveness (Loukas *et al.*, 2003).

Moreover, the adolescent is often exposed to negative models also in his peer groups or, so-called neighborhood gangs, who promote subculture and offer models of aggressive behaviors all the time to their new members (Myers, 2000). Other research shows that high levels of hostility, as part of aggressiveness, are correlated to poor financial conditions during childhood (Harper *et al.*, 2002, *apud* Matthews, Deary, Whiteman, 2005).

### **Social anxiety as a dimension of social difficulties**

Social anxiety has been defined by Schlenker și Leary (1982, *apud* Roth & Heimberg, 2006) as a phenomenon which appears when individuals are motivated in making a good impression on others and are not sure what will happen. We can meet such situations all the time in our activity, for example, when we go to an interview, when we have an exam that has to be sustained orally, when we meet someone new, with whom we would like to establish a friendship or love relationship, when we first meet clients, etc. Some individuals are very preoccupied by this and by the image they show that they can end up failing, end up feeling scared and stressed by social relationships. This fact will make them incapable of establishing functional, healthy relationships with others. Many researchers have assimilated social anxiety to evaluation anxiety, as situations in which individuals are evaluated lead to anxiety (André & Légeron , 2001). Other authors asserted that social anxiety is also an anticipation anxiety, as the socially anxious individual makes up anticipatory beliefs and even dark scenarios, based on false premises (Riviere, 1991, *apud* André & Légeron , 2001). As we well know, the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon is real and the socially anxious individual will actually fail because of these false beliefs, which tend to get confirmed.

Individuals with high social anxiety are often convinced that they will act in a wrong way or that other will judge them in a wrong way, and, also, they exaggerate the possible consequences of the fact that they have a negative image (Asbaugh, Antony, McCabe, Schmidt & Swinson, 2005). Moreover, these individuals claim they don't receive a much social support as they deserve or as they consider necessary. Lack of social support is correlated, as stated by researchers, with high levels of social anxiety (Calsyn, Winter & Burger, 2005). Thus, social anxiety affects the way the individual engages in relations and can lead to either inhibitions regarding the relationship, or inadequate aggressiveness, depending also on the partner, on his expectations as well as on the social constrictions of the situation (André & Légeron , 2001).

Social anxiety is correlated to a series of negative tendencies and behaviors, misjudgments and misbeliefs, irrational beliefs and negative self-evaluations (Patterson & Ritz, 1997, *apud* Calsyn *et al.*, 2005). The socially anxious individual has misbeliefs about himself as well as about the reality in which he performs as social actor. These beliefs can be divided into three categories (André & Légeron, 2001): beliefs about own behavior, beliefs about what the relationship partner might think and beliefs about the risks of engaging in certain actions. (Stopa and Clark 1993, *apud* André & Légeron, 2001) have shown that these individuals have an unfavorable self-image and about own performances, the individual having usually the tendency to point out what they are not doing right and no longer concentrate on the positive aspects of one's existence or activity.

Social anxiety is frequently correlated also with a deficit in social competences. These represent „ensemble of social behaviors developed in an individual that allow him to have efficient, adapting and gratifying relationships with people around him” (*ibidem*: 148). These behaviors are not innate, but gained through education, depending on the parental pattern or on different circumstances of life (Lieberman, 1975, *apud* André & Légeron, 2001), some individuals learning them better than others. These social competences are both non-verbal (for example, tone of voice, body positioning etc.), and verbal (for instance, if we express or not what we are looking for in our message, if we respect our interlocutor and his opinions). Verbal competences are affected by social anxiety, meaning that the socially anxious individual frequently finds himself in situations where he has to face strangers or important people, situations in which he will not know what to say.

Studies on children and adolescents have demonstrated that high levels of relationship aggressiveness are associated with a low interpersonal functionality and with psychological inadequacy (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Wener & Crick, 1991, *apud* Loudin, Loukas & Robinson, 2003). Social anxiety influences the attributions one makes regarding own behavior and others' behaviors, being defined as the fear of negative evaluation and/or avoidance of social contact (Watson & Friend, 1969, *apud* Loudin *et al.*, 2003). It is a quite common phenomenon and it can be found in different communities.

For adolescents, this phenomenon often appears and it can have problematic forms (Beidel, Morris & Turner, 2004, *apud* Elizabeth, King, Ollendick, Gullone, Tange, Watson, MacDermott, 2006; Ollendick & Hirschfield – Beker, 2002, *apud* Elizabeth *et al.*, 2006). The adolescent is living social anxiety excessively in different social contexts, in competitions or when he has to appear in front of strangers. Anxiety's effects on adolescents are at least unfortunate. It is correlated with low academic, occupational and social performance (Nuț, 2003). Felker (1969, *apud* Nuț, 2003) has shown in a study that students who underestimate themselves from the academic performances' point of view, but are positively appreciated by teachers or classmates, have a low level of anxiety, and if the student has an overestimated image of oneself, in other words if he has a

positive self-esteem, this will react as a defense against anxiety, in case other underestimate him.

Some dispositional traits, as social anxiety is, could influence the use of aggressive behaviors (Loukas *et al.*, 2003). Evaluation social anxiety is a component of social anxiety, characterized by a strong fear of negative evaluation from others (Kashdan & Herbert, 2001, *apud* Loukas *et al.*, 2003). From a social-cognitive perspective, individuals that feel hurt by others' behaviors could estimate that others have hostile intentions, even if these do not exist, and, in consequence, they will behave aggressively in order to defend themselves (Creech & Dodge, 1994, *apud* Loukas *et al.*, 2003). Adolescents with a high level of evaluation social anxiety turn to more subtle aggressive behaviors, indirect, because they maximize anonymity, and together with this others' negative evaluation, disapproval (Bjorkqvist *et al.*, 1992, *apud* Loukas *et al.*, 2003).

Considering the fact that social anxiety is correlated to a series of sad events in one's life, it is interesting to study the way in which these are different for adolescents who have a good existence, who live with their families, and adolescents who have had a difficult childhood and are in state care.

### **Objectives and hypotheses of the study**

The objectives of this study are: O1 – study of different aspects of aggressiveness at institutionalized adolescents by comparison to non-institutionalized adolescents; O2 – Study of relationship difficulties of institutionalized adolescents from the social anxiety's point of view; O3 – The analysis of the correlation between social anxiety and indirect forms of hostility (resentment, suspicion, indirect hostility). These objectives are sustained by a few hypotheses as following.

The study's hypotheses are: H1 – There are significant differences between institutionalized adolescents and non-institutionalized adolescents from the point of view of the different aspects of aggressiveness; H2 – There are significant differences between institutionalized and non-institutionalized adolescents from the point of view of hostility; H3- Social anxiety is manifested more by adolescents raised in orphanages than by adolescents raised by their families; H4 – There is a significant connection between social anxiety and indirect forms of hostility (resentment, indirect hostility, suspicion).

### **Participants and instruments**

In order to test the hypotheses of the study, I've chosen a group of 30 participants from an orphanage in the city of Arad, Romania, as well as 30 participants who had been raised by their families, having ages between 15 and 17. The participants complete a series of tests: Buss and Perry Aggressiveness inventory, The hostility questionnaire, by A.Liceanu, the social interaction questionnaire. (Glass, Merluzzi, Biever and Larson 1982, *apud* Janda, 1996). After the statistical analysis of the data, a series of conclusions can be drawn.

## **Results and discussions**

Firstly, there are significant differences between institutionalized adolescents and non-institutionalized adolescents from the point of view of the general aggressiveness ( $t(58)=3.461, p<.05$ ), and concerning its factors, significant differences were found between the two groups of participants from the point of view of physical aggressiveness ( $t(58)=2.889, p<.05$ ), fury ( $t(58)=2.91, p<.05$ ) and hostility ( $t(58)=2.25, p<.05$ ). The adolescents from orphanages manifest such behaviors or attitudes more clearly than their peers. This was not valid from the point of view of verbal aggressiveness ( $t(58)=.711, p>.05$ ). These results support the first idea, that adolescents who were raised in state care, deprived of the warmth of a home and the closeness of a family, without any consistent, positive parental models, are generally more aggressive, more furious and more hostile than their peers that are raised in families. This must be considered in caring for them and raising them, because such results can show future problems which at a social level will not only affect their group, but also other groups they come in contact with.

Moreover, significant differences have been found also for the second hypothesis of the study, from the perspective of general hostility ( $t(58)=4.99, p<.05$ ), of negativism ( $t(58)=2.00, p\leq.05$ ), resentment ( $t(58)=2.31, p<.05$ ), suspicion ( $t(58)=2.79, p<.05$ ), irritability ( $t(58)=2.84, p<.05$ ). Again, those who present all the above much more are the participants raised in orphanages. For the factors indirect hostility, attempt and verbal hostility, no significant differences have been found between the two groups of participants. It is normal for these children to experience negative emotion with regard to their life history and thus, to develop also towards others negative perceptions, emotions, sentiments and behaviors.

As for the third hypothesis of the study, significant differences have been found from the point of view of social anxiety between the two groups ( $t(58)=2.92, p<.05$ ). Adolescents from institutions are again those who experience social anxiety more than their peers. This shows that adolescents that were brought up in an institutionalized environment will have greater difficulties than their peers in situations of social evaluation, when they have to face different social situations. They will be more timid and lonely, or will have exaggerated reactions to a given social context, for example they will fear more than necessary meeting new people at school, or in their community, reacting either reserved or secluded. This fact will later confirm for them their biased beliefs regarding the social situation, thus engaging them in a vicious circle of anxiety in social interactions.

The last hypothesis of the study was not confirmed. This considered the existing links between the level of social anxiety and indirect forms of hostility.

## **Conclusion**

Adolescent psychology has been interesting for researchers for a long time. This period, marked by so many physical changes, social and spiritual changes is very delicate. That's why, for institutionalized adolescents it could be even harder

than for those who benefit from their family's support, because institutionalization has a great impact on their personalities. Thus, social dynamics for these adolescents are very interesting to study, especially focusing on problem behaviors like aggressiveness, hostility or social anxiety. These phenomena have, of course, body correlates and that is why I wanted to study also the link between social anxiety and somatization.

As for aggressive manifestations as social dynamics for institutionalized adolescents, relevant studies on an international plan have focused mainly on adolescents who are in the care of foster families, rather than in orphanages. These studies have been oriented mainly on serious behavioral issues of these teenagers as running away, deviant and delinquent behaviors, aggressive behaviors and engaging in inadequate social relations (Benedict *et al.*, 1996, *apud* Farruggia *et al.*, 2006; Courtney *et al.*, 2005, *apud* Farruggia *et al.*, 2006) and less on comparisons between these adolescents and adolescents from families. In the peer-reviewed literature from our country, studies were carried out on adolescents from orphanages, but they did not take into account the variables from this study, in a similar way (Găvănescu, 2000; Dincă, 2004).

From the point of view of social anxiety, studies in this field have focused on explaining the way this phenomenon appears. In adolescent psychology, relevant studies have pointed out that during this time in one's life a growth in the level of social anxiety exists to begin with, and it can reach problematic levels (Beidel, Morris & Turner, 2004, *apud* Elizabeth *et al.*, 2006; Ollendick & Hirschfield – Beker, 2002, *apud* Elizabeth *et al.*, 2006). This phenomenon looks like evaluation anxiety, considering one's struggles for individuality. Social anxiety for institutionalized adolescents has not been studied as an independent social dynamic. In these studies I have not found proof of research on this phenomenon. The same is the case of the connection between social anxiety and somatization, as well as between the level of social anxiety and the use of indirect forms of aggressiveness. But the theories regarding these phenomena can offer a series of explanations and research ideas also in this field, even if the studies on the considered aspects of this study have not been carried out in the same way.

Thus, the element of theoretical and methodological novelty brought up by the current study is precisely the way I chose to evaluate differences between institutionalized adolescents and those from families, regarding aggressive behaviors, social anxiety, or the connections between the level of social anxiety and use of indirect aggressiveness. Like this, a new perspective was offered over these phenomena concerning institutionalized adolescents who participated in the study.

As for the applicability of the results, I think that these reflect in an objective manner the way institutionalized adolescents behave, and they can be a good starting point in better understanding these children, who are many times treated unfairly just because they come from orphanages. Moreover, these results could be used for conceiving a personal development program, destined to institutionalized adolescents, in order to help them be functional members of

society, capable of maintaining their stress at a level that should not affect their health. The results could also serve as an example for institutions of care-givers who deal with these teenagers, by having an initial evaluation of the problems that these individuals can be confronted with. Measures can be taken in due time, so that these children don't reach more serious behavioral problems of major maladapting when they must leave the orphanage,

Regarding the limits of the present research, the main disadvantage is the relatively small number of participants that could not reflect in a more relevant way the social dynamics of the population from which the group was selected. At the same time, institutionalized adolescents are from one of the orphanages which benefit from a lot of financial support and also, the staff is preoccupied by the well-being of the children, from a social and emotional point of view, a fact that can be observed from the nature of the relationship between the staff and the children. Also, from an educational perspective, all the participants are enrolled in vocational schools, that give them a profession when they graduate. Another limit can be the selection of the participants who are raised by their families, because they were chosen from the best high school in Arad, the majority of them being very good students, with a major focus on study and personal development, as the preliminary questionnaires have shown. So, they might not be so representative from the general adolescent population, raised by their families.

Regarding future research, I find interesting a study focused on observing both the way in which institutionalized adolescents perceive themselves from the point of view of these social dynamics, but also the connection between this and the way the care-givers perceive these adolescents' behaviors. Moreover, another interesting study should focus on the social insertion of these adolescents in their class, at school or the correlations between this level of social insertion and aggressive behaviors, or the level of social anxiety.

The fact that there are significant differences from the point of view of these dynamics between institutionalized adolescents and adolescents from families could trigger an alarm that could contribute to the life of the institutionalized adolescents. Perceiving these differences as being problematic could give birth to initiatives that may contribute to the personal development of these adolescents, both focusing on developing life abilities, as well as from the point of view of facilitating their access to a higher quality education and to a growth in their social insertion level.

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