

PREDICTORS OF AGGRESSION FOR CHILDREN: INSTITUTIONALIZATION OR FAMILY?

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Abstract: The present research focuses on the differences in attributional style, aggression and decision making with regard to the personal future, between institutionalized children and those who live with their families. The study evaluates aggressive behaviors and identifies their predictors. Poverty, uncertainty, the lack of a cultural model, the absence of family experiences or the lack of connection with a family may perturb proper development. A sample of 183 children from the 4th and 5th grade was used (from public schools within the Vest area of Romania). A series of aspects were measured, such as emotions, attributional style, procrastination, career indecision and aggression. The instruments used in this research show high internal consistency for the target population of the study. Our results show that family background and a set of psychosocial factors influence the acquisition of certain maladaptive behaviors that may lead to socialization difficulties and a lack of adherence to society's norms.

Keywords: institutionalization, attributional style, procrastination, aggression, career indecision

Introduction

According to Bandura's social cognitive learning theory (1982, 1997) expectancies regarding personal efficacy indicate the perceived probability of being able to generate a certain behavior that is required for a certain desirable outcome. A heightened and prolonged effort usually leads to high performance and efficient situational coping styles.

Bandura did not offer in his theoretical model an explanation with regard to the manner in which attributions lead to the increase or the decrease of self efficacy. Success is most likely to be increased by self efficacy if the performance is perceived as a result of personal ability and not as a result of accidental external support. Success that is obtained with minimal effort leads to the development of the ability to attribute that reinforcement to a feeling of self efficacy. In the same manner, success that is obtained through high energy consumption implies the idea of low ability and thus may have a weaker effect on perceived self efficacy (Bandura, 1977, p. 201).

Children learn social abilities and diverse behaviors from family members, adult role models and also their peers, from repeated activities they are involved in as a group. Furthermore, children observe and imitate specific behaviors modeled by others. It is sufficient for a child to believe that he can be successful in an activity if he engaged in a specific behavior in order to increase the frequency of that behavior. Thus, aggressive behavior may have its origin in copying a family member, a role model or another child.

Research shows that the family is the most important framework for socialization (Harvey & Byrd, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007). Bandura's social cognitive learning theory (1982) may be applied both to girls and boys. Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers, and

Reebye (2006) showed that girls who observed their mothers manifest aggressive behavior toward their partners were more likely to be aggressive towards their own friends. Rudolph, Abaied, Flynn, Sugimura, and Agoston (2011) sustain that that children's responses to the aggressive behavior of their peers lead to adaptive responses based on their own perception of the social situation to which they respond to. The manner in which a person perceives a certain situation is determined by the way in which that person attributes a cause to that specific event. Thus, the manner in which a person thinks about and responds to a situation depends on the way that person makes causal attributions (Weiner, 1985, 1977).

Depending on children's perception of how successful they could be when involved in a certain behavior (self-efficacy), they would engage or not (postpone/procrastinate) in aggressive behavior. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997) argues that expectations lead to task initiation and persistence, and procrastination is only one type of behavior avoidance. Haycock, McCarthy, and Skay (1998) related procrastination to the way the subject perceives the situation and perceptions on self-efficacy. In addition, Blunt and Pychyl (1998), examined the relation between state orientation, proneness to boredom, and procrastination as proposed in Kuhl's theory of action (1994). The findings based on data collected from students on the Action Control Scale, revealed arousal, avoidance, and decisional procrastination to be positively related to state orientation. They found that proneness to boredom was positively related to state orientation, arousal procrastination, and decisional procrastination. Regarding gender differences results showed that females scored lower on general and avoidant procrastination than males. Blunt and Pychyl (1998, p. 844) explain this gender difference as being related to gender differences in self-identity and self-efficacy perceptions.

Diverse stressful situations such as economic or other type of difficulties in one's family may lead to an increase of aggression among family members. In accordance with Meron's (1938, pp. 672-674) stress theory, money and material objects become more important for society and for the individual. By this assumption stress results from economic pressures or from perceived financial or social status losses. Children may have to deal with tension within the family (divorce or other perturbation in the structure of the family) which may negatively affect the family's income and the family members' material possessions. Furthermore, they might experience difficulties within the environment in which they live in, which show that these financial difficulties may lead to an increase in aggressive behavior.

Personal and environmental factors (such as life conditions) may contribute to the development of children's aggressive tendencies (Farrington, Loeber, Yin, & Anderson, 2002). The transversal experimental study presented in this paper aims to identify the manner in which fundamental life differences are linked to children's aggressive tendencies.

Objectives

The lack of a positive model, of family experiences, of resources, insecurity and also abrupt changes determined by the loss of the family environment may affect the development of children and will lead to an increase in the vulnerability of their personality and general behavior. The difficulties that are generated by the life environment may influence children's behavior and frequently lead to aggressive behavior during childhood. Certain psycho-social characteristics of the environment have an influence over the overt and covert behavior of the

child. Also, children may develop difficulties in acquiring social skills, an adequate level of adaptation and may also develop aggressive responses in diverse life situations.

The present study aims at identifying the manner in which life situations (family vs. institutionalization) are linked to aggressive tendencies. This relationship is investigated by assessing verbal and physical aggressive behaviors and also other cognitive and emotional aspects for children with ages between 9 and 13 years.

Method

Participants

This study was implemented in Oradea, a major western city in Romania. The sample of participants consisted of 183 children with ages between 9 and 13 (parental or guardian consent was obtained for each participant child). One hundred and three children were constituted the group of children who lived with their primary family (39 girls and 64 boys, aged between 9 and 13; $m=11,24$ years, $SD=,78$). The other group contained 80 children from institutionalized homes (41 girls and 39 boys aged between 10 to 12 years; $m=11,71$ years, $SD=,59$). All children participating in the study attended public schools and had a comparable education level.

Institutionalized children live in groups of five to ten in single gender home. In the homes where the children from the study lived in had children with ages between 7 to 16 years. Any child may stay with the institution until the age of 18 years. Each home is overseen by a staff member, the institution's social worker, and by a psychologist. Most of the institutionalized children were abandoned at a very young age, very few know their parents, and did not have any interaction with their primary or extended family. Some of them present emotional or behavioral problems that the staff members need to deal with in the homes.

Research instruments

All children responded individually to a survey package containing the measures listed below. The children were instructed to ask for clarification if they did not understand what is required of them in any of the items of the survey. There was no time limit to complete the survey.

Children's Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ) was designed by Seligman, Peterson, Kaslow, Tanenbaum, Alloy, and Abramson (1984) to test the attributional style reformulation of learned helplessness in children. CASQ measures children's tendency to make causal inferences for events. The questionnaire has 24 items and uses forced choice items that each represents a hypothetical situation followed by two affirmations referring to the cause that produced the respective situation. Children are required to choose one of the explanations indicating the reason for that respective situation's occurrence. The CASQ has six subscales and it is measuring the causes of positive and negative events, along with the three major dimensions of the learned helplessness theory's causal attributions: control, stability, and globality. Research using CASQ (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986, 1992; Panak & Garber, 1992; Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979), revealed that children who report more depressive symptoms have a tendency to blame themselves for negative events (internal attributions), view the causes of the events as stable over time (stable), and generalize situations (global).

The Career Indecision Scale (CIS; Germeijs & De Boeck, 2003) has 22 items with affirmative statements regarding career decisions, the respondent must indicate the extent of agreement to each statement on a 7 point scale (0 = strongly disagree, to 6 = strongly agree). For all samples, internal consistency estimates for the CIS subscales were comparable to those for the original CIS (internal consistency was .79).

Profile of Mood States (POMS) was accepted as an efficient way of measuring psychological stress (Curran, Andrykowski, & Studts, 1995). In the present study we evaluated the psychometric properties of a shorter, 20 item version of the POMS. The data was provided by the 183 patricians. For all samples, internal consistency estimates for the POMS subscales were comparable to those for the original POMS (internal consistency was .90 for negative emotions and .88 for positive emotions; Marian, 2007). The POMS is considered an alternative to the original POMS (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1981) when a brief measure of psychological distress is required.

The General Procrastination Scale (GPS; Lay, 1986) is a one-dimensional measure associated with arousal procrastination (Ferrari, 2000, 2001), a behavior which arises from the motivation to increase one's arousal by working close to a deadline. This version of the GP consists of 20 items representing situations related to potential procrastination. Each item is scored on a 5 point Likert scale (1=false for me; 5=true for me). The GPS has been found to have a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .77 (see also Roşeanu & Marian, 2012).

The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) developed by Buss and Perry (1992) measures four dimensions of aggression: physical, verbal, anger, and hostility. The AQ is composed of 29 items and in which participants are asked to rank certain statements using a 5 point Likert scale, indicating the extent to which each statement is characteristic for them (1 = extremely uncharacteristic of me to 5 = extremely characteristic of me). The scores are normalized on a scale of 0 to 1, with 1 being the highest level of aggression. Correlational analysis using the scores of the AQ showed that anger is the bridge between verbal and physical aggression and hostility. The AQ has been found to have a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87.

Procedure and design

The children were tested individually; they were instructed to respond to their best ability, and chose the option that they think best applies to them personally. They were informed that there were no correct or incorrect responses. Later the results were compared across the two main comparison groups (children who lived with their family vs. institutionalized children) and also by the two secondary comparison groups (by gender).

In a first part of the analysis the independent variable was the represented by the child family status variable, living with own family vs. institutionalized. The dependent variables were: procrastination, attributional style (negative internal-external, stable-unstable, global-specific), dysfunctional emotions, career indecision, physical and verbal aggression, anger and hostility. In the second part of the analysis we used gender as the independent variable for the above mentioned dependent variables. In the final part of our research we used the child's family status and the negative attributional style (the stable-unstable dimension) as independent variables and career indecision as the dependent variable; and we also controlled for the gender variable.

Results and interpretation

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that institutionalized children tend to postpone important decisions regarding their life [$t(181)=-5,942$; $p<.001$; $d=-0,86$]. It would seem that the low level of reinforcement of pleasant activities and a general deficit of short term rewards have a negative effect of the institutionalized children's tendency to take important decisions about their own lives. This result is sustained by large of the size of effect ($d=-0,86$) for task procrastination and decision making. Furthermore, institutionalized children compared to those living with their families show a more accentuated negative style for personal negative events, thus they see those events as being internal [$t(181)=-5,939$; $p<.001$; $d=-0,86$] and stable [$t(181)=-6,502$; $p<.001$; $d=-0,97$]. The large size of effect for this result permits us to extrapolate this finding for the specific target population with a high degree of confidence. It is surprising to see however, that in the case of global attributions for negative events we obtained only a low effect size, yet statistically significant [$t(181)= 2,767$; $p<.006$; $d=0,41$]. Children who live with their parents present a more diverse set of global negative attributions ranging across a wide area of situations, while those who are institutionalized perceive negative events in a more specific manner. Thus, for the latter sample failure is not being perceived as something permanent, while for the children that live with their families failure is present across more situations which indicates an increase in cognitive vulnerability which implicitly leads to dysfunctional negative emotions [$t(181)=-2,771$; $p<.006$; $d=0,40$].

Table 1. Results from the comparison of the two main groups (children who live with their family vs. institutionalized children)

Variables		Mean	SD	t	p*	d*
Procrastination	Fam.	50,58	8,41	-5,942	.001	-0,86
	IH	59,68	12,28			
Attributional style: negative internal-external	Fam.	,95	,78	-5,939	.001	-0,86
	IH	1,77	1,09			
Attributional style: negative stable-unstable	Fam.	2,83	1,14	-6,502	.001	-0,97
	IH	3,96	1,18			
Attributional style: negative global-specific	Fam.	1,92	,72	2,767	.006	0,41
	IH	1,62	,71			
Dysfunctional emotions	Fam.	8,31	2,84	-2,771	.006	-0,40
	IH	9,56	3,26			
Physical aggression	Fam.	22,78	5,09	-9,618	.001	-1,38
	IH	32,81	8,86			
Verbal aggression	Fam.	14,45	3,27	-7,036	.001	-1,03
	IH	18,13	3,79			
Anger	Fam.	18,90	4,26	-5,164	.001	-0,76
	IH	22,35	4,74			
Hostility	Fam.	23,40	4,45	-3,386	.001	-0,50
	IH	25,70	4,65			
Career Indecision	Fam.	57,38	6,65	-3,571	.001	-0,54
	IH	60,55	4,86			

Note: Fam.- family; IH - institutionalized homes; *d – effect size; *p<.01

Verbal [$t(181)=-7,036$; $p<.001$; $d=-1,03$] and physical [$t(181)=-9,618$; $p<.001$; $d=-1,38$] aggressive behaviors are significantly different among the two compared groups of children, those who live in institutionalized homes being more aggressive in both cases. The size of effect is high in both instances (verbal and physical aggression) which indicate that aggression may be a common way of resolving problems for the institutionalized children.

Furthermore, the institutionalized children show significantly higher levels of hostility [$t(181)=-3,386$; $p<.001$; $d=-0,50$] and anger [$t(181)=-5,164$; $p<.001$; $d=-0,76$] compared to children living with their family. For the cognitive and emotional cues of aggression the size of effect is at a middle level which indicates that institutionalized children have a tendency to lose control much quicker than children that live with their family.

With regard to gender differences (see Table 2), our results show that in the case of internal vs. external negative attributions for negative life events girls who live with their families are those who display this type of causal attribution (negative internal) the most [$t(101)=-3,282$; $p<.001$; $d=-0,67$]; no such gender differences were observed for the institutionalized children. A similar result was obtained for the stable negative attributions [$t(101)=2,630$; $p<.01$; $d=0,54$], however, it is the boys who live with their family that display this type of causal attribution. In other words, in the case of children who live with their families girls tend to have an internal unstable negative attributional style, which may lead to a decrease in their self-esteem, while boys have a stable external negative attributional style. It seems that institutionalized children do not manifest this type of attributional style due to the fact that they had no possibility to learn by imitation the specific explicative patterns from family members.

Table 2. Results from the comparison of the two main groups (children who live with their family vs. institutionalized children) differentiated by gender

Variables			Mean	SD	t	p*	d*
Family	Attributional style: negative internal- external	B	,64	,74	-3,282	.001	-0,67
		G	1,14	,75			
	Attributional style: negative stable-unstable	B	3,20	1,08	2,630	.01	0.54
		G	2,60	1,13			
	Hostility	B	22,71	4,37	-1,229	.22	-
		G	23,82	4,49			
Career Indecision	B	57,28	6,08	-,126	.90	-	
	G	57,45	7,03				
Institutionalized homes	Attributional style: negative internal- external	B	1,80	1,10	,250	-	-
		G	1,74	1,09			
	Attributional style: negative stable-unstable	B	4,19	1,24	1,827	.07	-
		G	3,71	1,07			
	Hostility	B	24,39	4,52	-2,682	.009	-0.59
		G	27,07	4,43			
Career Indecision	B	59,29	3,98	-2,444	.01	-0.54	
	G	61,87	5,38				

Note: Fam.- family; IH - institutionalized homes; B – boys; G - girls *d – effect size; *p<.01

Hostility as a cognitive manifestation of aggression in diverse life situations is a specific characteristic of institutionalized children [t(101)=-2,682; p<.009; d=-0,59] mostly of girls who live in such an environment. Surprisingly the negative attributional style is not differentiated in the case of institutionalized children with ages between 9 and 13 years.

Career indecision is differentiated between the two types of environments, and is more accentuated in the case of girls [t(101)=-2,444; p<.01; d=-0,54]. The medium level size of effect is still psychologically important and it indicates that girls, due to the specific physiological changes they undergo in this period of time, perceive with greater accuracy the personal and environmental changes that occur and also the manner in which they rapport themselves to these changes.

In order to investigate relevant aspects of career indecision we selected for the next step of our study 40 four graders, 50 five graders and 13 six graders, all of whom were children that lived with their families. These children were divided into four groups of stable negative causal attributional styles (none, low, medium, high), based on their score on the CASQ. From the institutionalized children group we selected 25 four graders, 14 five graders and 41 six graders with an educational level similar to that of the children who live with their families (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Source		M	SD	Min.	Max.
Family	Attributional style: negative stabile-unstable	2,83	1,14	1	5
Institutionalized homes	Attributional style: negative stabile-unstable	3,96	1,18	1	6

Table 4. Comparison of career indecision by grades and stable-unstable negative attributional style, and controlling for gender; both groups (institutionalized children and children living with their families)

Source		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Family	Gender (controlled)	8,773	1	8,773	,237	-
	Grades	33,759	2	16,880	,457	-
	Attributional style: negative stabile- unstable	383,909	3	127,970	3,462	,02
Institutionalized homes	Gender (controlled)	58,075	1	58,075	3,040	,08
	Grades	72,614	2	36,307	1,900	-
	Attributional style: negative stabile- unstable	260,970	3	86,990	4,553	,006

Note: p<.01

In this analysis we started from the presumption that if gender is held a constant there will be differences in career indecision between the compared groups, by grade and stable negative attributional style, for both institutionalized children and those living with their families.

Table 4 shows the obtained results which indicate that gender does have an influence on career indecision for the institutionalized children. Also, stable negative causal attributions have a direct influence on career indecision for both groups of children [$F(3, 103)=3,040$; $p<.02$], [$F(3, 80)=4,553$; $p<.006$], which indicates a main effect. Thus, we may conclude that these groups differ significantly with regard to career indecision even when gender is held a constant.

Conclusions

As we have shown in the first part of our study, the lack of a positive model and of family experiences, as well as changes generated by the loss of the family environment may affect the development of the children which will increase the vulnerability at the personality level and at the general behavioral level as well. On the other hand, as Buss and Perry (1992) have shown difficulties generated by one's living conditions (environment) may influence children's behavior and frequently may be causes of aggressive behavior. Through the pages of this paper we have shown that the living environment of the child has an important influence over his manifest behavior. Children may develop difficulties in acquiring social skills, in adequate adaptation and may also develop aggressive responses in diverse life situations; and show a high level of career indecision.

Regarding the differences in aggressive behavior tendencies among institutionalized and children living with their family, results show that neither procrastination, nor the attributional style by themselves have an influence on the children's physical aggressiveness level. However, the combination of stable causal attributions for negative situations and procrastination will influence the level of aggressiveness. In other words, institutionalized children facing negative life situations (such as failure), will make stable causal attributions (e.g., think that the situation will not change in the future), and they will blame themselves it; this will result in an increase in the level of their physical aggressiveness. Thus, an institutionalized child with low self-esteem, who makes stable negative causal attributions, is likely to also present aggressive behavior.

As far as differences in attributional style by gender are concerned there were no such differences between children who live with their families and the institutionalized ones (note however that the pool by gender was rather small in each group). However, comparing girls and boys overall, statistically significant results show that boys make unstable causal attributions for negative events, while girls perceive negative events as having stable causes. For example if confronted with a failure situation a girl would perceive it as a permanent one, while a boy would think that is a temporary situation.

Results show that there are differences between children living with their family and the ones living in institutionalized homes with regard to the way in which they make causal attributions for events and situations in their life and their reaction towards decisions. Institutionalized children seem to be more prone to procrastination, reactions of hostility, anger, and aggressive behavior. These children faced from early childhood financial hardship, lack of warm and permanent positive role models, and also lacked the experience of a real family life. Thus, it seems that the institutionalized children in the absence of those positive role models can't learn the proper reaction to frustrating and conflicting situations and emotions. The children in our study live in single sex and mixed age group homes, and

despite the fact that they have staff members responsible for their education, it is very likely their closest role model is yet just another older child. They learned from observing others from within their living environment and according to Bandura's theory (1982, 1997), they perpetuate the observed behaviors.

Our results yield very important information to be used by school counselors (Szabo & Marian, 2012), social workers, and psychologists who work with these children, as well as teachers who have institutionalized children in their classroom.

Results from this study can be used by school counselors to help institutionalized children develop better skills and life coping mechanisms, more adaptive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions to life events, and to use less anger and hostility-based responses.

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