

EXTERNALIZING PROBLEMS AND DELINQUENT BEHAVIORS IN RESIDENTIAL-CARE MALE ADOLESCENTS: ASSOCIATIONS WITH PEER ATTACHMENT AND ALEXITHYMIA.

*Muzi, S.⁽¹⁾ & Bizzi, F.⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Department of Educational Sciences (DISFOR), University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy.

*corresponding author: muziunige@gmail.com

Project supervisor: Prof. C.S. Pace (cecilia.pace@unige.it)

N° póster: P021

BACKGROUND

Male adolescents in residential-care (RC) show high rates of **externalizing problems**, such as aggressive or delinquent behaviors (Castelli et al., 2017; Jozefiak et al., 2016). Due to their previous adverse experiences, RC adolescents also showed difficulties in peer attachment and more alexithymia than normative peers, which may also influence each other (Lino & Lima, 2016; Manninen et al., 2011).

Research findings underlined that **security in peer attachment** may have a protective role on the social adjustment of adolescents (Laible, Carlo & Raffaelli, 2000), but some studies reported that it also may support the involvement in delinquency, especially in residential contexts (Bender & Losel, 1997; Choon, Hasbullah, Ahmad & Ling, 2013). In addition, personality dimensions such as higher levels of **alexithymia** – defined as an “emotional regulation disorder” (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 2003) – may be a **risk factor for externalizing problems** (Di Trani et al., 2013).

Given the primacy of peer relationships in residential contexts, where teenagers live with peers all day, the investigation of the cumulative role of their peer attachment and alexithymia with respect to their psychological outcomes may have a preventive and clinical utility. However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies done it before.

THIS PILOT STUDY AIMED TO:

- (I) explore the associations among peer attachment, alexithymia and externalizing problems.
- (II) assess the risk of externalizing problems and delinquent behaviors in residential-care boys, considering peer attachment and alexithymia as possible risk-factors (i.e. predictors).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS & PROCEDURE

21 boys aged 13-18 years ($M = 16.33$, $SD = 1.4$), placed in residential-care due to their adverse past experiences. They were enrolled through social and mental health services for a larger multi-method research with other groups of looking-after adolescents (i.e. late-adoptees and in foster care).

Every participant and legal care-taker signed a written informed consent before the data collection, which took place into residential houses, in two individual sessions for each adolescent.

The entire procedure has been approved by the Ethical Committee for the Research, University of Genoa, Italy.

MEASURES

- 1) The **Youth Self Report 11/18** (YSR; Achenbach, 1991), a self-report questionnaire suitable for age 11-18 years, to assess the levels of emotional-behavioral problems (Internalizing, Externalizing and Other problems). For the purpose of this study, we considered only the scale of Externalizing problems (i.e. aggressive and behavioral problems) and the subscale of delinquency.
- 2) The **Inventory of Peer and Parent Attachment** (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Pace, Zavattini & San Martini, 2011) a self-report to assess the level of security in peer attachment.
- 3) The **Toronto Alexithymia Scale** (TAS-20; Taylor et al., 2003) a self-report to detect the global levels of alexithymia.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

(I) ASSOCIATIONS AMONG PEER ATTACHMENT, ALEXITHYMIA, EXTERNALIZING AND DELINQUENT PROBLEMS.

As literature suggested (Choon et al., 2013; Di Trani, 2013), higher levels of externalizing problems were related to higher levels of peer attachment ($r_s = .600$, $p = .009$) and alexithymia ($r_s = .447$, $p = .04$). Moreover, in line with other studies (Bender & Losel, 1997; Manninen et al., 2011), we found positive associations among higher scores of delinquency and both peer attachment ($r_s = .629$, $p = .005$) and alexithymia ($r_s = .464$, $p = .03$).

(II) RISK PREDICTION: Supporting the findings of Bender & Losel (1997), a higher peer attachment was a unique significant predictor!



CONCLUSION

Results suggested the potential utility to monitoring the quality of peer-attachment in potentially high-risk contexts like residential ones, whereas it may elicit or perpetuate aggressive or delinquent behaviors among adolescents, instead of promoting social adjustment. Moreover, even if alexithymia did not result in a predictor, it showed associations with both externalizing and delinquent problems, for which it could be a potential risk factor. Therefore, the role of attachment and emotional dysregulation for residential adolescent's psychopathology should be deepened, as doing into this larger study, using also clinical interviews such as FFI and TSIA.

