

## SELF-ESTEEM, ASSERTIVENESS AND RESILIENCE IN ADOLESCENTS INSTITUTIONALIZED

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### ABSTRACT

The institutionalization of children and adolescents has been an increasingly visible problem in modern society. Unfavourable socio-economic conditions have been joining the behavior problems and school absenteeism. When the family fails in its competence for education, social security or the Court withdraws the child or adolescent to a host institution.

The aim of this research was to characterize self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience of institutionalized adolescents in the northern region of Portugal and to establish associations with these dependent variables and gender, scholar level and duration of the institutionalization. For the purpose of this study a wider questionnaire was carried out, and validated with a smaller group. It was a transversal study following a predominantly quantitative methodology, with a convenience sample. The sample included 101 adolescents (55 females and 46 males) from eight institutions, aged between 11 to 21 years old (average 15.45).

For self-esteem the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), already validate for Portuguese adolescents, was used. For assertiveness and resilience it was applied the Global Evaluation Scale of Assertiveness and the Global Evaluation Scale of Resilience (Jardim & Pereira, 2006) we previously adapted and validated for adolescents. Collected data was introduced in a SPSS database. A descriptive analysis was done to characterize the sample concerning all the variables. To establish associations between individual factors and dependent variables t test, non-parametric tests and correlations were applied.

Results indicated a relatively low self-esteem (28.03), with girls having a lower value than boys, without significant differences. No correlations were found between self-esteem and the time in the institution. Assertiveness of the sample is average (23.97) and higher for girls than boys, with a positive significant correlation with the scholar grade. Also the resilience is average (25.97), having girls a little lower mean than boys and no significant differences or correlations were found.

**Key-words:** Adolescents, Self-esteem, Assertiveness, Resilience

**INTRODUCTION**

The institutionalization of children and adolescents in Portugal has been an increasingly visible problematic in our current society. More than eight thousands children and adolescents are in host institutions. If between 2005 and 2008 a decrease in the number of institutionalized children and youth was registered, after 2009 an increase was observed, as well as a variation in the age group more represented, coming to be those aged between 11 and 14 (Carvalho, 2013).

According to the CASA Report for 2014 (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2015), there were 8470 children and youth institutionalized in that year, with 2143 new cases and only 767 cases who finished this situations.

The reasons for the institutionalization are diverse and explicit by the Law for Protection of Children and Youth at Risk (Law n.º 147/99). Situations of abandonment, maltreatment, sexual abuse, violence, negligence, exploitation of work in infancy, crime and the absenteeism at school, among other situations that compromise the health and well-being of children and youth, are referred in the n.º 2 of the Article 3<sup>d</sup>. This legal document also defines the constitution of the Commission for Protection of Children and Youth at Risk, that are linked to the Town Hall, as well as the social responses, like the Homes for children and youth, which are changing now (due to new regulation), and we here also call as host institutions.

Today more requirements are established to maintain children at home, near their biological family. Unfavourable socio-economic conditions have been joining the behaviour problems and school absenteeism.

When the family fails in its competence for education, social security or the Court withdraws the child or adolescent to a host institution. Our close with these institutions allow us to know to the needs of the team, which include educators, psychologists, social workers and some teachers. Some behaviours are reported by team, but contact with children and adolescents rarely occur. The more referred problematic behaviours are related to sexuality, to running away from the institution and to cognitive and emotional competencies. Based on these reports emerge the interest in study of the self-esteem, the assertiveness and the resilience of these adolescents.

**SELF-ESTEEM, ASSERTIVENESS AND RESILIENCE**

*Self-esteem* is related to feelings and thinking of one individual about his own value and competencies, which reflect a positive or negative attitude about himself (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem, on one hand is considered one of the main predictors of favourable outcomes in adolescence, concerning with relationships and school performance. On the other hand it tends to be related to antisocial behaviours, aggression and delinquency in youth (Sbicigo, Bandeira & Dell'Aglio, 2010).

*Assertiveness* has been firstly defined by Lazarus (1971/1980, cit in Marchezini-Cunha & Tourinho, 2010) as the ability to say no and make requests, ask for favours, express negative and positive feelings and start, continue and end a normal conversation. Later, Lange, Jakubwski and McGovern (1976) considered assertiveness as the defense of personal rights and the expression of thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a direct, honest and appropriate way, in order to respect the rights of other people. The assertive behaviour has been analyzed in parallel with aggressive and passive behaviour (Marchezini-Cunha & Tourinho, 2010). These authors suggest that the behavioural relationships defined as assertiveness, aggressiveness and passivity can be interpreted as instances of self-control or impulsivity.

Several behavior disorders are consequence of children maltreatment, negative familiar relationships and the exposure to traumatic situations. The ability to win a potentially traumatic situation, with a renewed strength represent the concept of *resilience* and it depends on not only personality traits but also on dynamic adaptive processes (Anaut, 2005). The precursors of the term

resilience are the term invincibility and invulnerability and this is a relatively new concept, being its focus on the family even more recent. In relation to family it can be understood in the perspective of crisis or in a salutogenic perspective (Yunes, 2003).

The main goal of this research was to characterize self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience of adolescents who were removed from their families of origin, and consequently institutionalized, in the northern region of Portugal. Moreover we want to verify if there are any associations between these dependent variables and individual factors like gender, scholar level and duration of the institutionalization and the time adolescents stay in the host institution.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is predominantly quantitative and it was a transversal study, as data were collected near the individuals in a single moment (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

For the purpose of the study a wider questionnaire was carried out, and validated with a smaller group. Given the difficulties do access to this population, our sample was a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), in two ways. Firstly, some host institutions contact us to help them with adolescents' behaviours. Continuing this interaction, we contacted the institutions, established agreements with them, present the questionnaire to the director of each one, and after obtain their informed consent we asked to apply the questionnaire in order to make a diagnosis of the adolescents' competencies.

The sample included 101 adolescents, being 55 females and 46 males, from eight institutions located in the northern region of Portugal. Adolescents were between 11 to 21 years old (mean = 15.45; SD = 2.36).

To evaluate self-esteem the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), already validate for Portuguese adolescents, was included. This scale include ten items, being five in positive sense and five in negative sense. It has four scores (which were inversely codified in negative items): 1= totally disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = totally agree. A sum of the items' values was done to evaluate the adolescents' self-esteem. It vary between 10 to 40 points and it was considered: low self-esteem until 25 points; average between 26 and 35; high for greater or equal to 36 points. For assertiveness and resilience it was applied the Global Evaluation Scale of Assertiveness and the Global Evaluation Scale of Resilience adapted from Jardim e Pereira (2006) by Marinho (2014). We previously adapted and validated these two scales for adolescents of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Cycles of Basic Education. This two scales have eight items and five scores: 1= never; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = frequently; 5 = almost always. Following Jardim e Pereira (2006) also a sum of the eight items of each variable was done. For assertiveness it is considered low between 8 and 18 points; average between 19 and 30; high from 31 to 40 points. Authors classify low resilience if individuals obtain between 9 and 21 points; average from 22 to 34; and high resilience between 35 and 40 points.

Collected data was prepared, codified and introduced in a SPSS (version 23.0) database. To analyze data, it began with a descriptive analysis in order to characterize the sample based on their individual factors and to characterize the global self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience of these institutionalized adolescents. To establish associations between independent and dependent variables inferential statistics was applied. We used T test for independent samples to compare differences between females and males, as well as the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test to analyze associations between ordinal variables. Also Pearson' correlations were used to verify the associations between dependent variables and the factors school grade, duration of the institutionalization and time adolescents stay in the host institution. Finally, the Pearson' correlation was applied to the three dependent variables. Has all these variables are quantitative, so Pearson' correlation is the appropriate (Pestana & Gageiro, 2003). The significance level established was  $p = .050$ .

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### RESULTS

#### *Socio demographic characteristics of the adolescents*

Adolescents of this sample were 54.5% females and 45.5% males. Their age varied from 11 to 21, with a mean of 15.45 ( $\pm$  2.36) and a median of 15 years old. About the school grade we have one in the final of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cycle and one who refused to respond this questions. The school grade where there were a major percentage of students was 9<sup>th</sup> grade, which means the final of basic education level. These distribution is shown in table 1.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of adolescents by school year

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Valid		
4.º	1	1.0
5.º	3	3.0
6.º	18	17.8
7.º	10	9.9
8.º	18	17.8
9.º	28	27.7
10.º	8	7.9
11.º	4	4.0
12.º	10	9.9
Total	100	99.0
Missing	1	1.0
Total	101	100.0

Analyzing how long adolescents were in the current institution, 58.0% were there more than 24 months; 14.0% between 13 and 24 months; 14.0% between 7 and 12 months; 7.0% between 3 to 6 months; and 5.0% less than 3 months. Data reveal a long period of institutionalization for the majority of the adolescents.

On the other hand, the permanence in the host institution was classified according the week, weekend and holidays. Most teenagers go to their home some weekends and holidays (54.8%); near a third stays always in the institution (29.0%); 7.5% is there only during the week; and also 7.5% go to home only in holidays.

### SELF-ESTEEM

The self-esteem of our sample, globally is average (28.03), being the modal value 28. Nevertheless, a minimum of 13 points was registered and a third of the adolescents (33.3%) obtained a sum inferior than 26 points, which indicates low self-esteem. An average self-esteem characterized 58.4% of the teens and 8.3% revealed high self-esteem.

Although the girls have lower value than the boys in global self-esteem, as well as in the majority of the items, no significant differences was identified using the T test.

Analyzing the influence of the school grade, using the Kruskal-Wallis test, adolescents of 5<sup>th</sup> year had the lowest value while those of the 7<sup>th</sup> year present the highest value.

Searching for some association between self-esteem and the school grade, the period of institutionalization and the permanence in the institution, we applied the Pearson' correlation and no significant relations were found.

## ASSERTIVENESS

Globally, the assertiveness observed in our sample is average (23.97). The median value was 25.00, reinforcing to situate the group into the mean standard. Low assertiveness was observed for 23.8% of the teenagers, average for 49.5% and high for 26.7%.

Comparing girls and boys, a higher value was obtained for girls in the sum, as well as for almost all of the items. The exception was registered for the first item: "usually I express my ideas". According to the T test these gender differences are no statistically significant.

About the scholar grade, in spite of no significant differences, the Kruskal-Wallis test put teens of 9<sup>th</sup> year in the inferior rank and those of the 10<sup>th</sup> year at the superior rank.

While applying correlations, results show a positive significant correlation between assertiveness and scholar grade ( $r=.220$ ;  $p=.028$ ). Assertiveness did not correlate with the period of institutionalization nor the type of permanence.

## RESILIENCE

For the personal capacity of resilience an average standard was also identified (25.97). The median was 27.00, having a minimum of 8 points registered by one teen and a maximum of 40 obtained by four. Low resilience was found for 20.8% of the adolescents, average for 65.3% and high for 13.9%. The item in which the mean value was inferior was "even in stressful situations I keep the tranquility".

Analyzing differences between genders, globally girls have lower means than boys in almost all the items. Only for the statement "faced with the hardships of life I continue to fight" the means of girls and boys were equals. The parametric T test note significant differences between females and males for the items "I can reduce the negative effects of adversity" and "I assume my problems without appreciating too much or devalue it". For the statement "I have managed to overcome the difficulties that life has put me" the  $p$  value was near the level of significance established. Table 2 presents these gender significant differences.

Table 2: Gender differences for resilience (T Test)

		N	Mean	t	P
I have managed to overcome the difficulties that life has put me	Female	52	3.23	-1.945	.055
	Male	44	3.64		
I can reduce the negative effects of adversity	Female	51	3.14	-2.347	.021*
	Male	44	3.61		
I assume my problems without appreciating too much or devalue it	Female	52	3.25	-2.700	.006**
	Male	44	3.82		

\*Significant at the level  $p<.050$ ; \*\*significant at the level  $p<.010$

Associating scholar grade and resilience, the positions given by the Kruskal-Wallis test put the adolescents of the 5<sup>th</sup> level in the lowest rank and those of the 10<sup>th</sup> level in the highest order. However this different positioning is not statistically significant.

Continuing to search for associations between resilience and the school grade, the duration of institutionalization and the time teens live in the host institution no significant correlations were also found.

Applying the Pearson' correlation to the three dependent variables it was observed that assertiveness is positively and significantly correlated with self-esteem and resilience (Table 3), being the correlation with self-esteem weak but the correlation with resilience moderate (Pestana & Gageiro, 2003).

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Table 3: Pearson' correlation between Self-esteem, Assertiveness and Resilience

		Self-esteem	Assertiveness	Resilience
Assertiveness	Pearson' correlation	.258*	1	.511**
	<i>p</i>	.011		.000
	N	96	101	101

\*Significant correlation at the level .05; \*\*Significant correlation at the level .01

**DISCUSSION**

Our results reveal very positive given the population in which the study focused. Being adolescents with familiar problematics we expected to found lower outcomes for self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience. However, comparing these results to those from the sample of 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> school years' adolescents studied by Marinho (2014) also in the northern region of the country, outcomes were similar. In general, adolescents have an average self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience.

Specifically in the case of self-esteem, as no significant relations were found between self-esteem and school grade and time of institutionalization, these results reveal that self-esteem is an internal construct of the individual, being a part of the self-concept (Martín-Albo, Núñez, Navarro & Grijalvo, 2007) and these factors associated to institutionalization are not influencing adolescents' self-esteem, which seems a non-injurious effect. Nevertheless, younger adolescents had the lowest self-esteem. Following the scholar grade, the minor rank was registered for students of 5<sup>th</sup> grade. In opposite, the higher rank was obtained by those of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. We remind that sample included adolescents from 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and this last result is surprisingly when compared with a previous study we done (Anastácio & Carvalho, 2006), including students from 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in which those from 7<sup>th</sup> degree had the lowest level of self-esteem.

In terms of *assertiveness* the lower value obtained by girls for the expression of their ideas, is important to be considered, because in spite of their greater ability to talk comparatively to boys (Brizendine, 2006) in unfavourable context emerge this characteristic of female. And it is intensified in familiar contexts of maltreatment and violence. The increasingly assertiveness along the school level may indicates a development of skills in result of the socialization and educative process. Moreover, as scholar grade is positively correlated with the period of institutionalization it is possible to be a result of the intervention of the host institutions. Nevertheless, it is surprisingly to have the minor rank for adolescents of 9<sup>th</sup> grade and, in opposite, the major for those of the grade immediately after – 10<sup>th</sup>. We think other factors can interact to explain this result, specifically the major percentage of teenagers of the sample attending the 9<sup>th</sup> year and the increase of this aged group in institutionalization process (Carvalho, 2013) due to behaviour problems.

About *resilience*, verifying that item “even in stressful situations I keep the tranquility” was that registered the lowest value in the whole sample, we can think it is understandable, as here we have a population with some individuals following therapeutics to control anxiety and other mental disorders. They are teens who come from non-harmonious contexts and most of them were exposed to very stressful situations, namely those involving maltreatment and socioeconomic deficiency.

As no significant correlations were found between resilience and the factors school grade, period of institutionalization and the time teens stay in the host institution, our results reinforce the contribution of personality traits for resilience (Anaut, 2005).

The positive and significant correlations obtained between assertiveness and self-esteem and resilience is interesting and lead us to understand it as constructs that develop in conjunction.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the problems associated with institutionalization it is comforting to note that this group of teenagers presents values of self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience within the desirable or satisfactory parameters.

No significant differences were found in association with gender, school level, period of institutionalization and the permanence of the adolescents in the host institution.

These results, in general, show that these three individuals' skills were not so affected by the institutionalization process. On the other hand, if children and adolescents were in risk situation at home, it seems the host institutions constitute an appropriate solution to maintain the balance and well-being for them.

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