Aspects of emotional life and communication in institutionalized children

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Abstract

Foster homes or foster care centres provide different conditions for the evolution of institutionalised subjects, which emphasize a behavioural and personality type somewhat different in comparison to regular life style situations. As such, affectivity and communication are the most sensitive elements to the life environment that does not always have favourable effects upon the subjects’ psychic evolution.

The purpose of this study is that of underlining the dimension of the institutionalised environment upon the birth and evolution of communicational and affective structures, as well as emphasizing the distortions of communication and affectivity as an effect of the institutionalised environment.

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1. Introduction

The confrontations between the internal stimuli (motivation) and the surrounding reality have effects in the form of affective processes due to the fact that the objects, phenomena, events affecting men leave their mark upon their conscience, correspond or not to their needs or necessities, satisfy or not their interests, aspirations, ideals. As such, the approval or satisfaction of internal necessities generates pleasure, content, enthusiasm, joy, discontent, indignation, sadness. "It is not the object in itself that is important, but the relationship between the it and the subject, for it is only within such a relationship that the object acquires significances depending on the degree and duration of satisfying necessities. This helps us understand why one and the same object produces different emotional states to different persons. Even in the case of one and the same person, the same object produces different emotional states, as it

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once fully satisfied the respective person’s requirements, other times only partially or failed to satisfy them at all.” (Popescu-Neveanu, Zlate, Crețu, 1992).

As Prof. Schiopu underlines, affectivity and its development hold a significant role in the adaptation process. The evolution is achieved in the way of diversifying affective relationships while organic adaptations take place and the field of interaction and interrelation with the ambient environment is enlarged. (Schiopu, Verza, 1997).

Language is an open system which develops within inter-human relations. In the support of this statement there comes in a suggestive manner M. Golu’s definition in cybernetic terms of the human psychic as “A self-regulatory assembly of states and processes structured by dint of the signalling, reflecting and symbolising principles; these are jointly balanced by means of specific comparison, classification, opposition, spatial-temporal writing, generalisation operators.” (Golu, 1975)

Communication is a key concept in contemporary psychology, which lays at the basis of understanding and applying the entire process of man’s psycho-behavioural development.

According to the contents it displays, interpersonal communication may be divided into three distinctive types: informational-cognitive, affective-motivational and regulatory. It thus results that affectivity represents a particular form of intersubject communication, whose content comprises experiences and dispositions.

The given types of affective communication are as follows:

- **Contagion** consists in the extension of experiences and dispositional states from one person to the next, by means of a situational resonance mechanism. Within communication by contagion, emotional states not only extend, propagate from one person to another, but they also get amplified, thus increasing, upon each and every person, their positive or negative effect.

- **Projective communication** – on its grounds we establish, for the most part, affective relations of mutual sympathy, mutual antipathy, unilateral sympathy and antipathy or indifference – within social groups.

- **Emphatic communication** consists in the intuitive reception, based on profound resonance, of the other person’s experiences and dispositional states and one’s transposition into the same state as the latter’s. Empathy is a pillar for the intensification and psychological comprehension of the others (Sillamy, 1996).

Guilford (1959) understood empathy as an ability to predict, to acknowledge the emotional dispositions of another person, his or her perceptions, thoughts, feelings and attitudes, and Koestler (1964) considered it a phenomenon of entrance into the species of unitary symbioses with other egos, as a source of our understanding of the way in which other people exist and think. In his turn, S. Marcus attempted a more operational definition, indicating that “empathy is that psychic phenomenon manifested particularly within interpersonal relations, by means of which someone identifies themselves with another person, thus gaining the direct understanding and knowledge of that person” (Marcus, 1977, p.10-11).

As such, we can state that there can be no absolute inter-human communication except for the extent to which it is achieved at an affective level, as well.

Through the present paper we wish to bring our contribution to the clarification of certain specific aspects within the structure and operation of affectivity and communication under the conditions of a different life environment from that of the vast majority of people, as is the case of the foster care centres.

2. Objectives

In terms of objectives, we focused our attention on the following:

- emphasizing the influence of the institutionalised environment upon the birth and evolution of communicational and affective structures
• emphasizing the distortions present at the level of communication and affectivity in the case of children from foster care centres
• identifying the positive and negative factors at the level of communication and affectivity, involved in adaptation

3. Hypotheses

• under the conditions of the institutionalised environment, the most sensitive structures to the positive or negative influences of the entourage are the communication and affectivity ones
• the institutionalised environment conditions a specific typology of communication and affectivity

The current study was carried out on a batch of 102 subjects from foster care centres, aged between 6 and 18 years old, most of which were female subjects.

4. Methods

The main methods used were: 1. the Woodworth-Mathews questionnaire in order to emphasize the following traits: basic emotiveness, obsessive tendencies and psychasthenia, schizoid tendencies, paranoid tendencies, depressive and hypochondriacal tendencies, impulsive and epileptic tendencies, tendencies towards instability and antisocial tendencies; 2. The Little Man’s test in order to emphasize characteristics of affectivity and communication in the case of the investigated subjects

5. Results

Gathering the data obtained from the Woodworth-Mathews questionnaire, the results indicate the following conclusive ascertainments:

The elevated values of the questionnaire reflect the existence, in the case of the studied subjects, of an affective disequilibrium and a mental discordance (the schizophrenia and paranoia scale);

The neglect of this fact, on the grounds of unfavourable conditions (in our case – the separation from one’s natural family and the child’s institutionalisation, inadequate, repressive and frustrating treatment, the absence of attachment and psychological support, etc.) causes these tendencies to gain ground and evolve towards pathologic structures. In this respect, foster care institutions must impose themselves in the most stringent manner to periodically perform the psychological investigation of the children and discover the early stages of such tendencies.

The fact that the highest scores were recorded on the Depressive and psychasthenic tendencies and Basic emotiveness scales indicates that the most fragile and vulnerable field within the institutionalisation scenario is affectivity.

The fact that the lowest score was obtained on the Antisocial tendencies scale indicates that in the case of the vast majority of children belonging to the batch investigated with the Woodworth-Mathews questionnaire, there are no rejective-type psychological instances which would make them refractory and hostile towards social norms.

The fact that certain subjects recorded values too low or too high on a specific scale included in the questionnaire applied imposes that they should be kept under careful supervision and be urgently provided with qualified psychological assistance.

The results obtained at the present questionnaire are synthetically presented in table no. 1.
Table 1. Results obtained at the Woodworth-Mathews questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic emotiveness score</th>
<th>Obsessive and psychasthenic tendencies score</th>
<th>Schizoid tendencies score</th>
<th>Paranoid tendencies score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-50</td>
<td>7,6</td>
<td>2,2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>9,6</td>
<td>14,9</td>
<td>51-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-150</td>
<td>14,3</td>
<td>12,8</td>
<td>101-150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>151-200</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>40,3</td>
<td>151-200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-250</td>
<td>18,3</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>201-250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251-300</td>
<td>17,4</td>
<td>12,8</td>
<td>251-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301-336</td>
<td>3,8</td>
<td>12,7</td>
<td>301-350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Depressive and hypochondriacal tendencies score %  Impulsive and epileptic tendencies score %  Score for tendencies towards instability %  Antisocial tendencies score %

| 0-50                  | 0-50                                         | 0                         | 0-50                     | 14,9                       |
| 51-100                | 2,1                                          | 21,3                      | 51-100                   | 31,9                       |
| 101-150               | 31,9                                         | 40,4                      | 101-150                  | 29,8                       |
| 151-200               | 23,6                                         | 21,2                      | 151-200                  | 12,8                       |
| 201-250               | 23,3                                         | 12,8                      | 201-250                  | 2,1                        |
| 251-300               | 10,6                                         | 4,3                       | 251-300                  | 6,4                        |
| 301-318               | 8,5                                          | 0                         | 301-350                  | 2,1                        |

The graphic representation, in general, and the drawing, in particular, reflects not only the level of the child’s chronologic age, his or her characteristics differing from one stage to the next, but also the level of the psychic, intellectual, affective and relational-attitudinal development.

The qualitative side of the drawing emphasizes important aspects of the institutionalised children and teenagers’ affective and communicational fields. An utmost importance in revealing the peculiarities of the inner emotional-affective life and the availability of relationship-making and communication belongs to the analysis of the four major areas of the human body: a – the head, b - (the hands, the arms, the shoulders and the chest), c – the torso and d – the legs. The purpose of analysing these areas is that of identifying conflict points, aspects of exaggeration, omissions and distortions (Verza, 2004).

The implementation of the Little Man’s test provided us with a significant amount of information both on the institutionalised children and teenagers’ level of general psychological development, as well as on the affective field and the communicational-relational one.

1. As far as the relational-communicational field is concerned, the Little Man’s test revealed the existence, for 36,2% of the batch subjects, of certain inner psychological difficulties and barriers in establishing and maintaining social and interpersonal contacts and interactions. The test emphasized avoidance tendencies and attitudes of suspicion and mistrust with regard to the individuals around, or egocentric manifestations and group turbulence.

2. The most disturbing problems occurred in the affective field, most of the subjects - 63,5% - presenting more or less visible emotional balance disorders. From a structural perspective, these materialise mainly as four primary entities: existential anxiety and the feeling of insecurity, the tendency towards aggressiveness/hostility and the tendency towards shrinking into one’s shell/depression.

In the calculation of the correlation coefficients we took into account the idea that the various dimensions, traits and capacities of the personality are not isolated and autonomous, but they are in a tight
and logical interdependence and mutual conditioning. The variables among which we deemed it necessary to emphasize the correlative connection were: the intelligence coefficient, the correctness of answers, basic emotiveness, obsessions and psychastenias, schizoid tendencies, paranoid tendencies, depressive and hypochondriacal tendencies, impulsive and epileptic tendencies, tendencies towards instability and inconstancy and antisocial tendencies. In order to calculate the values of the correlation coefficients, we used the Pearson procedure and we gathered the following main ascertainments: the existence of a positive significant and highly significant correlation, from a statistical point of view, between: tendencies towards instability-inconstancy and schizoid tendencies, impulsive-epileptic tendencies and obsessions-psychastenias, paranoid tendencies and basic emotiveness, schizoid tendencies and basic emotiveness, depressive-hypochondriacal tendencies and basic emotiveness, paranoid tendencies and the schizoid ones, schizoid tendencies and obsessions-psychastenias, depressive-hypochondriacal tendencies and obsessions-psychastenias, paranoid tendencies and the impulsive-epileptic ones, paranoid tendencies and tendencies towards instability-inconstancy, antisocial tendencies and the instability-inconstancy ones, paranoid tendencies and the depressive-hypochondriacal ones, impulsive-epileptic tendencies and basic emotiveness, obsessions-psychastenias and paranoid tendencies, the correctness of answers and the intelligence coefficient; the existence of a statistically significant negative correlation between the schizoid tendencies and the intelligence coefficient.

The data above underline primarily the complex, diversified and contradictory character of the personality structure even in its early stages of emergence.

References