

Culture and Adversity: An Exploratory Study of Attachment Representations in Fostered Lithuanian Children



Lina Gervinskaite-Paulaitiene^{a*}, Yael Shmueli-Goetz^b and Izabele Grausliene^a

^a Department of Clinical and Organizational Psychology, Vilnius University, Lithuania, ^b Anna Freud Centre, London, United Kingdom



Contacts for correspondence: lina.gervinskaite@fsf.vu.lt

Background and Aims

Attachment in middle childhood has been the focus of considerable research in the last decade (Röder et al., 2014) with the impact of separation from biological parents on the quality of subsequent attachment relationships receiving greater attention (see for example, Zaccagnino et al., 2014).

Although attachment is a universal phenomenon, relatively little is known about the expression of attachment in different cultures beyond infancy and early childhood. Critically, the ability to communicate emotions and thoughts is central to the formation of attachment bonds and to the expression of attachment representations through narratives. In this process, caregivers reflective functioning might play an important role as well. Little is known about attachment expression in Lithuanian culture, where, traditionally, communication about emotions in families has not been the focus.

This current study explores how fostered children with early adversity experience talk about their attachment relationships. It represents a first attempt to study attachment in middle childhood in Lithuanian sample by eliciting attachment-related narratives. The study aims to shed light on the ways in which attachment might be manifest in Lithuanian culture, in children with adverse life experiences.

Sample

Participants were 12 children, aged 8-10 years old, (9 girls, 3 boys) living in diverse foster care arrangements and their foster mothers. Eight children were living in household type foster care homes, two children in foster care families, and a further two children were adopted.

Measures

Attachment

Children completed the *Child Attachment Interview* (CAI; Shmueli-Goetz et al., 2008), a well validated narrative based assessment of attachment in middle childhood. The CAI was established as a reliable and valid attachment measure with Lithuanian children in a separate validation study (N=119, Gervinskaite-Paulaitiene, Grausliene, & Barkauskiene, 2015).

Reflective functioning (RF)

Foster mothers completed the *Parent Development Interview* (PDI; Slade et al., 2003), which was used to code RF.

Results

Table 1. Attachment classifications with foster and biological parents (n)

Attachment classification	Secure	Insecure dismissing	Insecure Preoccupied	Disorganized	Cannot rate	No information provided	Not applicable
Foster mother	5	4	-	3	-	-	-
Foster father	3	-	-	-	-	-	9
Biological mother	3	1	1	-	1	6	-
Biological father	2	1	-	-	-	9	-

RF and coherence of attachment representations

Caregivers RF (M=4.73, SD=1.1) and children's CAI coherence (M=4.63, SD=2.54) was not significantly related ($r = -0.214, p > 0.05$).

Main Findings

Emotional Openness. Variation from good to very impoverished EO was observed in interviews. In the majority of interviews children merely labeled emotions or used generalised "felt good" or "felt bad". Many struggled to name feelings, responding with "I don't know".

I was confused, when (...) said that I had to move out from my mother's. I was angry with everyone then. 300101

They laughed, because I was afraid and it was fun for me. But it was scary as well. 300107

How did you feel in that situation?

I don't really like to wait... 300108

Unpleasantly... 300103

Happy. **How do you think your mother felt?** Same. 300201

Coherence of narrative. Children gave fragmented accounts about attachment experiences and frequent prompting was observed from the interviewer.

If you've done something wrong or done something to make her cross with you, what does she usually say or do? Go to... Go to? ... to the room. Does she do or say something else? Nothing. (...) She gets angry often or seldom? Often. Can you tell me about the last time she got angry with you? Yesterday... What happened? ... 300103

Descriptions of attachment figures

Some children found it difficult to describe their relationships with attachment figures.

.. that is, what it's like to be with your mother? Bad. ... and that's all. I don't know. ... I don't know anything. 300104
... I have bad memory. 300106

Tell me about a time when you felt that your relationship were friendly. ... (laughing) I don't understand, how to explain. **Maybe you remember the last time you thought this way?** ... we talk friendly... I cannot explain. 300101

Emphasis on shared activities was notable as distinct from descriptions of the quality of the relationship, including associated feelings and thoughts.

She prepares food, buys clothes, shoes. 300106

Well, sometimes it happens, that she scolds me. **What could be another word to describe your relationships?** Well.. We communicate... 300107

He helps with my homework.. Comes to watch TV.. We go outside. 300203

It feels good with her. Well, I watch different movies with her and it's warm... She keeps me company, when I am upset. 300203

Some children idealized attachment figures using generalized examples.

She loves us. She really does. [...] We walk together, she cares. 300108

Mother is sincere. **Can you give example when she was sincere?** She lets me watch TV longer. 300106

Anger in relation to biological parents was observed in couple interviews.

I am older, I now understand that I hate my mother. I would even ... I am so angry with her! 300101

Could you tell me three words... I cannot tell you anything, I don't live with her! **But you meet with her?** She just gives presents and leaves, she doesn't say anything to me! 300104

Relationships between foster siblings. Rivalry or negative interactions between foster siblings were mentioned in some of the interviews.

So we are at war with her often. 300101

It is difficult for me with family, because there are the new ones, Agne, Ieva and Kristina, they need to be pampered little bit and I'm very very jealous of that. 300104

Self descriptions. Some children found it difficult to describe themselves, others described self in terms of behaviour or abilities.

I help my mother. I clean. (...) I am good-hearted. 300201

Could you tell me three words which describe you as a person? ... good, not good. **Good and not good? Are they two words?** Yeah.. **Could you think of the third word to describe yourself?** Good.. I don't know.

Discussion

Whilst Lithuanian fostered children differed in their attachment security and on important attachment dimensions, some common tendencies were observed in most of the interviews. The findings can be seen in light of early adverse experiences and in context of Lithuanian culture. Lithuania has experienced important social transformations over past two and a half decades (Gailiene, 2015). Furthermore, it seems that for a long time talking about internal experiences was not very frequent in everyday life in Lithuania. This context can be related to the nature of child rearing practices, the quality of conversations in families and with development and expression of attachment representations.

This exploratory study represents a unique first attempt to study attachment representation of school aged fostered children in Lithuania. Although the findings are limited in scope, we hope to extend the study and shed further light on attachment and the impact of adversity and culture on its expression in middle childhood.