The Psychosocial Reality of the Abused and Abandoned Child in the Valencian Community

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This work is divided into two fundamental parts. In the first part we will present an epidemiological analysis of 1641 children between the ages of 1 to 18 years old who have been abused and abandoned in the Valencian Community. In the second part we will analyse the aggression and self-esteem in these children in relation to the variables family structure, the sociocultural level and the geographic immigration.

Introduction

Among the works in the field of the maltreatment and abandonment we can find a great number of factors associated or related to this social problem. They include the individual characteristics of the parents to those related to the economic, cultural and social variables.

If we look at the diverse factors enumerated in different studies, it would be possible to synthesize them in four categories:

- The factors related to the family interaction are probably the most numerous and the most common. They include such variables as family discipline, the parent’s attitudes and education, which together appear more or less to be responsible for the cognitive and emotional development of the child (Lewis and Coates, 1980; Musitu et al., 1985).
- Personal and behavioral factors of a child which cause or facilitate abandonment, such as suggested by Fontana (1971) and Green (1971) among others.
- The personal and behavioral factors that refer to biological parents, where it would be proper to include the psychopathological features identified by Gelles (1973) and the lack of personal skills to control aggressiveness, frustration and hostility (Gil, 1974); or lack of social repertory and the hyperactivity in the face of uncomfortable events.
- Such social factors as low incomes, educational level, profession, etc., summarized in studies by Castello (1986), Gil (1971), Garbarino (1976), Musitu et al. (1986) and Escarti and Musitu (1987).

On the other hand, the factor which was considered as fundamental in investigations about maltreatment is related to learning aggressive behaviours. In this way, it was proved that the children who grew up in at atmosphere of maltreatment behave more aggressively towards other children, objects and adults than the children who did not live in such an environment. This fact seems to support the thesis of Bandura (1973) which affirms that children who grew up in an atmosphere of maltreatment can acquire through imitation the aggressive behavior patterns. Others authors such as Musitu (1982) and Gelles and Cornell (1985) affirm that the “ontogenesis” of an aggressive repertory could be found in the context of a child’s maltreatment and abandonment and in the sociocultural environment that significantly supports aggressiveness. In the same sense an interesting work by Runyan and Gould (1985) concludes that a high percentage of aggressive children and aggressive unsocialize delinquents belong to the families, which consistently use punishment and negligence.

On the other hand, numerous investigations
support the hypothesis that children living in family contexts of conflict and aggressiveness show a poor social adjustment and low self-esteem (Burgess and Richardson, 1984; Garbarino, 1981; Raschke and Raschke, 1979), therefore a relationship between aggressiveness and self-esteem can be found. It is considered that the lack of positive feelings about oneself could increase aggressive behavior and at the same time the aggressive behavior can be perceived as a negative characteristic and in this way, contribute to the feelings of low self-esteem (Kinard, 1979). In this way subjects with low self-esteem seem to perceive interpersonal relationship as threatening (Rosenberg, 1965). This perceived threat explains the relationship found between aggressiveness and self-esteem.

Investigations that combine social environmental variables with aggressiveness and self-esteem are few. This aspect is of great importance, if we take into account that the majority of these children come from broken generally punitive, family atmospheres. According to the variable knowledge these variables have a decisive weight in aggressiveness and self-esteem.

Within the framework of this shortage of studies and in considering our works about self concept in this paper we propose the following objectives: 1) to realize an epidemiological analysis of children's maltreatment and abandonment in the Valencian Community and 2) to analyse the aggressiveness and self-esteem of institutionalized children also in the Valencian Community. We began with the hypothesis that institutionalized children (Those children who are taken care of by the state) have a lower self-esteem and therefore, show greater aggressiveness than uninstitutionalized children.

Method

Population and Sample: The population is the group of neglected and abused children in the Valencian Community. The sample is more or less half of the population: the population is composed of 1641 subjects between the ages of 1 and 18, 823 of these subjects are males and 818 are females. A sample was also used of 479 children between the ages of 10 and 13. They live with their biological families. From this, 240 were boys and 239 were girls. A group of 83 institutionalized children was used; 150 boys and 33 girls between the ages of 10 and 13 were selected by chance from the total sample of institutionalized children.

Questionnaire: For the first objective we formed a questionnaire to obtain the information in a systematic and exhaustive way from the archives of the Institution and obtaining the information about the personal history. With this instrument we get the children's and parent's identifications data, the socio-educational aspects, the children's and parent's relatives, the sisters and brothers, the cause of the institutionalization, the social support and finally the children's socio-environmental situation. For the second objective we used four tests, one to measure self-esteem and three to measure the aggression (received, emitted and inhibited).

Self-esteem Scale (Musitu, 1982). This scale is composed of four dimensions: 1) anxiety-insecurity (children's perception of their insecurity, it is defined by fears and nervousness of the children in the situation which they usually act); 2) social (children's perception of their abilities for having a relationship with their peers, teachers and other significants); 3) self-control (children's perception of the inadequacy of their acts in different environments: familial, social and educational); 4) academic (children's perception of their school production, teacher's acceptance and peers's academic acceptance).

Aggression's Scale (Musitu, 1982, 1983). This questionnaire is composed of 3 scales: 1. Emitted aggression, 2. Received aggression and 3. Inhibited aggression.

Results

Epidemiological analysis of the neglected and abused children in the Valencian Community

A. Children identification variables

Age. As can be seen in the graphic I, the frequency in the two extreme ages - 18 and 1 years old - is minimal if we compare them with the rest of the age group.
ABUSED AND ABANDONED CHILD

Graphic I. Frequencies of Abandonment according to children's age

It is important to point out that the frequency is also similar in the middle's years of schooling. The tendency grows up from birth to the last years of schooling, reaching a stationary level in the next 9 years and descending substantially, in the next years from the age of 15.

Sex. The results are very similar for both sexes (48.6% are female and 51.4% are male). There is a major percentage of neglected children in the male group although these differences are not substantially significant.

B. Parent's identification variables

Age. The majority of male parents are between 45 to 49 years old (it gathers at 24%) the next intervals are between 35 to 39 and 40 to 44 years. The intervals that group a minor number of fathers are the first, with the male parents younger than 34 years old and the last, with fathers older than 50. Whereas for the mothers the greatest frequency is that of mothers younger than 34 years old which is 35% of the total. The next largest is the interval of 35 years old with 23%. It is important to notice that these two first intervals represent 58% of the mothers, and that there is some increase in the distribution of frequencies between the first and the last interval. If we compare the result of both groups, we can see that the mothers are younger than the fathers. Notice also that 58% of the mothers are younger than 39, but in the group of the fathers, the percentage is only 36%. On the other hand 43% of the fathers are older than 45 years old. The percentage of mothers in this age group is only 23%.

Immigration. The major percentage is the group of fathers that was born outside of the Valencian Community (35.5% of the entire sample are immigrant parents). For the mothers the percentage in the same 36.6%.

Profession. The major percentage (56% of the total) is manual labor. To a lesser degree are the fathers who work in shops (19%), and the unemployed fathers are 11%. The rest are small shop owners, clarks or handicapped or retired parents. From this data we can see that more than a half of these fathers are unqualified workers, must of them only work short periods of time. It means earning low incomes and being most of the year without working. Only 23% of the mothers work, of this group 56% are either office help or shop-keepers, another 23% of the working mothers are manual laborers. The rest are retired or handicapped.

Level of education. The major percentage are in the group of fathers with elementary education (45%), the next is the group with middle education (38%). It is important to notice the fact the 15% of the fathers are illiterate and only 2% haver university studies. The same variable in the group of the mothers has a different distribution. The majority are in the group of elementary studies (44%) and the next one is the group without basically any education (25%) which is larger than the corresponding group of the fathers. In relation to the higher education the percentage is minimum both for the fathers and mothers (2% and 1% respectively). From this data we can see that the mothers have a lower level of education and a larger index of illiteracy.

C. Social variables of the family

Civil state. We'll consider the following categories: married, separated, divorced, single mother and other groups. The married group is the largest (48%), the next group is separated
parents with 35%. From the rest of the categories it is important to notice that the group of single mothers are 6% of the whole. It is interesting to consider in this context, the fact that the kind of relationship we are talking about in this research, is the children’s relationship to the biological parents at the moment in which maltreatment or abandonment occurred. The data shows us, that after institutionalization the relationship of the parents change with both parents seeking other relationships.

Emitted aggression: In the six variables that compose this questionnaire we received significative differences from what we expected except in the variable “fraternal rivalry and aggression” (table 2).

These results tell us that the uninstitutionalized children are more aggressive in their interaction with their brothers and sisters than institutionalized children. These results seem obvious if we notice that the children who live in an institution with their sisters and brothers, are unable to express themselves in an aggressive or non-aggressive way.

Received aggression: In this scale the differences appear more clearly (table 2). According to the data we can infer that the institutionalized children, more than un institutionalized children, perceive the different schooling and familial situations as being more aggressive and threatening.

Inhibited aggression: In this scale we have not found any significant differences among the variables “inhibited aggression in the familial context”, “sociability”, and “parental attention”. However we have found differences in the variables “aggression by personal injury” a higher level in institutionalized children and in “inhibited aggressiveness against teacher”, in which the higher means correspond to uninstitutionalized children (table 2). From this one can infer that institutionalized children inhibit more aggressiveness in their relations with their peers in the environment of school and also in the different atypical situations that occur in the classroom. As for “inhibited aggressiveness against teacher”, the uninstitutionalized children show more aggressiveness in their relationship with the teacher.

Conclusions

Structural variables

In order to define the structural variables that might cause a child to be institutionalized, we firstly establish that all of the children come from low-income families. Fathers are unqualified workers with a high unemployed rates and the great majority of mothers work in domestic service. This framework which defines their socio-
Table 1. Student's "t" in the self-esteem variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Var.</th>
<th>Institutionalized</th>
<th>Uninstitutionalized</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>s. s.</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S. D.</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>27.663</td>
<td>6.115</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>24.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>26.518</td>
<td>4.565</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>31.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>28.625</td>
<td>6.157</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>29.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>21.578</td>
<td>4.976</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15.309</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A1 - Anxiety-insecurity  
A2 - Social  
A3 - Academic  
A4 - Self-control

Table 2. Student's "t" in Aggressiveness in the groups institutionalized and uninstitutionalized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variab.</th>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Emitted</th>
<th>Received</th>
<th>Inhibited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S. D.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E1</td>
<td>11.735</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>83</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E2</td>
<td>13.060</td>
<td>2.847</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E3</td>
<td>2.373</td>
<td>0.599</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E4</td>
<td>8.072</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E5</td>
<td>10.904</td>
<td>2.583</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E6</td>
<td>7.651</td>
<td>2.045</td>
<td>83</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R1</td>
<td>14.422</td>
<td>3.819</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>5.663</td>
<td>1.647</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R3</td>
<td>10.205</td>
<td>2.418</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R4</td>
<td>6.602</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R5</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>I1</td>
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<td>I3</td>
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<td>I4</td>
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<td>I5</td>
<td>1.561</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I6</td>
<td>10.361</td>
<td>1.620</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E1 - Indirect aggressiveness against the academical authority  
E2 - Fraternal competition and aggressiveness  
E3 - Displaced spontaneous aggressiveness  
E4 - Interactional replying aggressiveness  
E5 - Rebellion against the family pattern  
E6 - Objectual aggressiveness  
I1 - Inhibited aggress. (family)  
I2 - Guilt for misbehavior  
I3 - Inhibited aggress. (Peers)  
I4 - Inhibited aggress. (corporal punish)  
I5 - Parent's attention  
I6 - Inhibited aggress. (Teacher)  
R1 - Parent's aggressiveness  
R2 - Teacher's aggressiveness  
R3 - Peer's aggressiveness  
R4 - Parent's verbal aggressiveness  
R5 - Arbitrary aggressiveness parental  
R6 - Coercitive scholar discipline
economic situation is completed by the fact that many of these children are sons and daughters of immigrant parents who come from undeveloped Spanish communities. What’s more, this situation of economic dearth usually remains constant in many of these families, a fact which compels (a great number of these children) to remain in the institutions for many years.

Familial variables

The above mentioned “macrovariable” in interaction with family variables tends to produce institutionalization of the child. We can consider four essential categories within these macrovariables:

1. “Family violence and familial adversity” refers to the violence between the parents, violence against children and alcoholism are highly significant factors.

2. “Physical neglect” is an important motive of child institutionalization as well. Motivations that induce a parent to abandon his/her child can be conscious or unconscious. It is necessary to analyze them in order to understand the final cause of neglect. Our data confirm those obtained by Giovannoni (1971) who considered that the act of abandonment is more closely connected with environmental factors characterized by the poverty than those related with physical abuse. In this sense we concluded that in the families where physical abuse took place, there was a higher socioeconomical status than those families who neglected or abandoned their children.

3. We can complete the framework of familial violence and neglect by adding “familial rupture” caused by separation and home withdrawal, and negative parental educative model i.e. bad examples and prostitution to the previous categories.

4. Special attention should be paid, as well, to those categories which are referred to as “familial adversity”, defined variables such as parent’s death and physical and mental illness which together with limited socioeconomical situations (begging, unemployment) lead to the institutionalization of a great number of children. In this regard we might mention Kempe and Kempe’s work (1969) which considers the demographic traits, social and economic factors, lack of community roots, lack of support in immigrant families, social isolation and unemployment as causes of abuse and neglect.

Self-esteem

In relation to the second aim of this work, form which we derive our hypothesis, we conclude that institutionalized children have less self-esteem than uninstitutionalized children. The received emitted and inhibited rates are higher in institutionalized children than uninstitutionalized children. These results confirm our hypothesis.

Aggressiveness

However, we confirm the existence of a relation between aggressiveness received by the children from their parents and teachers and the aggressiveness expressed by the child which is directed either to others or to objects. These data permit us to assert that institutionalized children behave more aggressively with their peers. They are less tolerant and are more suspicious and distrustful in their interactions.

At the same time, they show hostile feelings toward their teachers and educators. The children also perceive their teachers as being unfair; and they feel discriminated against in the application of discipline.

In regard to inhibition of aggression we didn’t find any significant differences in the variables: “inhibited aggressiveness in familial context”; “sociability”, and “parental attention”. However, we did find differences in those referred with the “inhibited aggressiveness among peers in the school environment”; “inhibited aggressiveness by personal injury” and “inhibited aggressiveness against the teacher”. Those who show the most aggressive behavior in school situations are the institutionalized children, especially when they feel damaged or non accepted by their schoolmates. However, the opposite occurs in the inhibition of aggression in relation to their teachers. Institutionalized children are the ones who most appear to be inhibited.

Finally the results of our investigation show that the institutionalized child is the result of the interaction of two groups of variables closely
related: *Structural Variables* defined as serious social and economic deprivation, and *Familial Variables* which is the probable consequence of previous variables, the most important: being alcoholism and drug addiction, psychological and physical neglect, high rates of violence and bad examples, physical or mental illness, delinquency and imprisonment, or death, or desertion of the child by either or both parents leaves a child who shows closely connected a low self-esteem, high rates of hyperactivity, distrust and aggressiveness in different social and academic situations.

**Intervention**


This programme has been applied with good results by J. R. Lutzker of the University of Carbondale in Illinois. We would like to have the same success in our programme in the Valencian Community.

**Bibliography**


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**Résumé**


**Resumo**