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Research article

Attachment representations and socio-emotional difficulties in alternative care: A comparison between residential, foster and family based children in Chile

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ABSTRACT

Attachment has been assessed in children living in alternative care (AC) settings, such as Residential Homes (RC) and Foster Care (FC). However, no study has been conducted to compare attachment styles in residential, foster and parental care conducted as usual in the same country at the same point in time. There is also a lack of studies conducted in less developed countries. Therefore, the aim of this study was to compare outcomes for children living in three different types of care in Chile. Three groups of children ($N = 77$), living in (RC), (FC) and with biological parents (PC) were compared. Attachment styles, Indiscriminate Friendliness (IF) and socio-emotional/behavioral difficulties were assessed.

Higher rates of secure attachment were observed in the RC group (36.1%) when compared to studies in RC in other countries (mean 18%). However, children in both types of AC were significantly more likely to have insecure and/or disorganized attachment styles than PC children. Higher rates of socio-emotional and behavioral problems were observed in RC (55.6%) and FC (50%) compared to PC (10%). Within type of AC, no significant differences were found, for attachment styles or for socio-emotional/behavioral difficulties, the only difference were the levels of IF, with children in RC having higher levels. As a conclusion, impact of placement in AC can vary between different countries, other factors, rather than only type of AC could better explain differences in attachment security for children. Implications for research and practices are discussed.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory has been an important framework for the study of outcomes in institutional settings. This perspective has highlighted the importance of the relationship a child establishes with its primary caregiver for his/her future social, emotional and behavioral development (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979; Mikunelincer, Shaver, & Perey, 2003). Children with a *Secure* attachment have had the experience of an available and stable caregiver and, thus, have developed a sense of secure base, which allows them to explore the world and express their feelings and needs. Interactions with less available or less consistent caregivers generate insecure

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attachments in children, which are less optimal strategies. These can be *Avoidant* (in which attachment system is suppressed and the child learns to be self-sufficient, avoiding the expression of needs and feelings) or *Ambivalent* patterns (in which attachment system is hyper-activated and the child is focused on the relationships and emotional expression, such that their exploration of the world is impaired). A fourth group of children are unable to develop any organised form of attachment (i.e., Secure, Insecure Avoidant/Ambivalent); these children have usually been exposed to extreme neglectful or abusive caregiving or to severe instability of caregiving (e.g., in institutional care). In institutions, factors such as shift systems, high staff turnover or very high child-to-caregiver ratios often reduce caregiver's physical and emotional availability. Thus, the setting in which children are raised is likely to impact on their emotional care and subsequent attachment.

A large body of research has been conducted with children living in institutions or children who were raised in institutions and then moved to foster care or were adopted. The majority of these studies have been conducted in the USA and Europe, and they reveal that the experience of being raised in large, impersonal institutions has a negative impact on attachment styles and other outcomes for children, such as behavioral and socio-emotional difficulties. In fact, being raised in a deprived institution is considered a risk factor for developing behavioral problems (such as impulsivity and aggressive behavior or, alternatively, inhibited behavior) and socio-emotional difficulties (such as anxiety, withdrawal and lack of self-regulation; Rutter et al., 2010). Additionally, studies have revealed that children raised in deprived institutions usually develop what has been called "indiscriminate friendliness", an over-socially behavior in which the child does not differentiate unknown from familiar adults (Zeanah et al., 2002; Zeanah, Smyke, & Dumitrescu, 2002). However, the outcomes previously mentioned could be mediated by the quality of the interactions that children have with their caregivers while living under their care.

In terms of attachment in children living in institutional care, rates of secure styles vary from 0% to 47% and disorganized attachment from 5.35% to 65.8% depending on the country and the methodology of the study (for a detailed review of outcomes see Garcia Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2016a). Based on the results of these studies, several countries have developed the implementation of foster care programs as a better setting for children without parental care. Secure attachment rates in children raised in these settings are higher when compared to institutional care (52%–69.4% in FC) and disorganization is lower [13.1%–42.7% in FC; (Garcia Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2016a). However, a recent meta-analysis found that foster care did not improve the rate of behavioral problems in children (Goemans et al., 2015; Goemans, van Geel, & Vedder, 2015). Furthermore, the few studies conducted in less developed countries reveal that the characteristics of institutional care, foster care and outcomes for children can vary widely between countries and that rates of attachment styles in residential care are moderated by country of origin, among other factors (Lionetti et al., 2015; Lionetti, Pastore, & Barone, 2015).

Interpretation of findings within studies of attachment in alternative care is complicated by the fact that few studies compare outcomes of attachment in different settings *within* the same country; rather, comparisons are usually made between residential homes in one country and foster care in another, which may vary in their social, economic and cultural realities. The only study that compared residential, foster and parental care was conducted in Romania where foster care did not exist previously; thus, the study included a group of children that were placed in a foster care program which was specially designed as an intervention with optimal conditions that may not be present in foster care programs conducted as usual (Smyke et al., 2010; Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010).

In addition, despite large numbers of children in public care, little research has been conducted in Latin America and, specifically, in Chile regarding outcomes for children living in Alternative Care. The two previous studies conducted in Chilean institutions revealed higher security rates in children raised in residential care when compared to other countries (51.2% and 47% vs 18%; ; Lecannelier, 2014). During the last two years, important debates have taken place in Chile regarding the quality of care provided by residential homes, and recommendations that foster care should be utilized over residential care are being implemented. One other study explored the presence of difficulties (socio-emotional and behavioral) in this group and found high levels of total difficulties and emotional difficulties as measured by Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Zavala and Jiménez, 2015; Zavala & Jiménez, 2015). However, no study has yet explored attachment styles in children living in foster care in Chile. Furthermore, no study has yet been conducted with three different types of care (conducted as usual) *within one* country to assess attachment styles and other outcomes for children.

1.1. Aims

Therefore, the aim of this research was to conduct the first study to compare attachment styles in children living in residential care, foster care (conducted as usual) and parental care children in the same country. Specifically, the study aimed to explore attachment styles, indiscriminate friendliness, and socio-emotional and behavioral problems in children living in two types of alternative care (residential and foster) and to compare differences between them and a group of children raised by their parents. Five hypotheses were explored in this study regarding outcomes for children in three groups of care in Chile:

- Based on a previous meta-analysis, it is hypothesized that children in Residential care in this Chilean sample will have higher rates of secure attachment and lower rates of disorganized attachment compared with samples in other countries.
- There will be: a) higher rates and b) higher scores of insecure attachment and disorganized attachment in children in alternative care (RC and FC) compared to those raised by biological parents (PC).
- Children living in RC will score higher for indiscriminate friendliness compared to children in foster care or parental care.
- There will be higher levels of socio-emotional and behavioral problems in children living in alternative care (RC and FC) compared to children in PC.

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