



# Does sibling relationship matter to self-concept and resilience in adolescents under residential care? ☆



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## ABSTRACT

The adolescent's transition to residential care is marked by significant emotional events. According to attachment theory, the affective bond between siblings may provide the stability and support that help to overcome difficulties during transitions. Using structural equation modeling the present study analyzed the associations between quality of sibling relationship and self-concept of institutionalized adolescents, testing the mediating role of resilience in this association, and the moderating effect of the maintenance of contact between siblings. The sample consisted of 387 adolescents living under residential care (due to abandonment, parental neglect or lack of family socio-economic conditions), between 12 and 18 years, from both genders and living in the Northern and Central Portugal. The results showed that the quality of sibling relationship predicted a positive self-concept, and resilience played a mediating role on the previous association. The moderating role of sibling contact on the association between the quality of sibling relationship and self-concept was observed. The results are discussed in light of attachment theory, pointing to the links between quality of sibling relationship and the development of self-concept and resilience.

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## 1. Introduction

During the last decade, we have witnessed a progressive interest of the scientific community in the topic of institutional care of children and young people due to abandonment, parental neglect or lack of family socio-economic conditions. However, little attention has been given to the emotional dynamics during the transition and throughout the stay of adolescents in residential care. In Portugal, entering institutional care constitutes a nodal event for children and adolescents because in most cases it carries the breakdown of relationships with the family and the need for emotional reorganization (Calheiros & Patrício, 2014). Because there are still few foster families in Portugal, during the year of 2013, there were placed 8.445 children and adolescents in residential care (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2013). This study is based on attachment theory and discusses the importance of the quality of affective bonds held by these adolescents with siblings for adapting to the emotional challenges that institutionalization entails. The relationship with siblings is an issue rarely addressed in the literature in the

context of residential care, and it is relevant to examine the extent to which this relationship enhances the adaptation of the adolescent, especially when they come into residential care due to abandonment or parental neglect. Although the relationship with siblings usually does not function as a secure base in the same way as the parental relationship, it may represent an important source of emotional support, and may contribute to the self-concept of the adolescent (Barnett & Hunter, 2012). This study also highlights the importance of maintaining emotional contact with siblings during residential care, in the sense that it appears to facilitate the adaptation of young people, enhancing the development of the resilience process (Cicchetti, 2013).

### 1.1. Attachment and the role of siblings in adolescents under residential care

According to attachment theory, originally conceptualized by Bowlby (1969, 1988) and Ainsworth (1969), the relationship between the child and the parents (or caregivers) plays a central role in the child's emotional development. Bowlby (1980, 1988) gives special relevance to the cognitive-emotional representations that the child constructs of himself and of caregivers. These dynamic internal working models are constructed from the first months of life and reflect the history of interactions with caregivers. Depending on the caregiver's sensitivity and consistency of care, the children create a model of self as being more or less worthy of being loved and of others as more or less available to respond to attachment needs. Establishing close emotional ties

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with sensitive caregivers sets the foundation for future social and emotional development and adaptation (Ainsworth, 1989). On the contrary, the dissolution or rupture of emotional ties through separation, deprivation or unresolved grief may lead to psychological disorders during infancy and throughout adulthood (Guidano, 1987; Guidano & Liotti, 1983). Although each family member is to experience the adverse situations in a particular way, generally there is a feeling that seems to be shared by the similarity and reciprocity of experiences, particularly among siblings (e.g., Atkin & Tozer, 2014; Conger, Stocker, & McGuire, 2009).

The role of siblings has not been well explored in the attachment literature about children and youth at risk, however siblings may be able to provide security in face of difficulties (e.g., Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Lockwood, Gaylord, Kitzmann, & Cohen, 2002; Whelan, 2003; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007; Yeh & Lempers, 2004). Since siblings spend a considerable amount of time together and the shared experiences and emotions may be intense, the quality of ties generally plays an important role in the life course of youth (Dunn, 1998; 2000), especially when future experience can bring significant personal difficulties (Atkin & Tozer, 2014; Shortt, Capaldi, Dishion, Bank, & Owen, 2003).

The relationship between siblings is significantly intertwined with family dynamics, in particular with the relations between parents and children (Fernandes, 2002). In healthy family environments, these relations are characterized by exchange of affect, favoring the development of cognitive-affective cooperation and preparing for the adaptation in social context (Noller, 2005). They are different from peer relations to the extent that they are characterized by greater involvement and reciprocity and allow the differentiation of the self (Fernandes, 2005). On the other hand recent findings indicate that sibling relationship quality helps differentiate patterns of adjustment to environment marked by stressful experiences (e.g., alcoholic parents, stressful divorce and interparental conflicts) (Piotrowski, 2011).

Ainsworth (1989) stressed the importance of attachment among siblings who may function in some situations as a secure base, and may provide feelings of unconditional support and encouragement in difficult situations. These influences may be extremely significant because siblings generally share a life story and establish strong ties of affection, intimacy, friendship and trust, contributing to the development of the self. Thus, siblings often take roles as caregivers, friends and supporting figures throughout life (e.g., Conger, Stocker, & McGuire, 2009; Kramer & Kowal, 2005; Zukow-Goldring, 2002). Bowlby (1973) had also called the attention to the importance of siblings, as familiar companions, in determining the emotional state, especially when children were in residential nursery with siblings.

When looking at the residential context, the relational siblings' system assumes greater importance. Entering institutional care entails, in most cases, an unwanted disruption that can enhance feelings of rejection in adolescents. Therefore, beyond the emotional discontinuities that characterize a family context of potential neglect, the transition to residential care is often associated with a sense of loss in the feeling of belonging and a sense of emptiness in the face to the unknown (Anaut, 2005; Spence & Matos, 2000). Thus, the way adolescents are welcome in the institution seems to make a difference in overcoming emotional barriers, and the role of significant figures such as the staff of the institution, peers and siblings is of special relevance (Beckett et al., 2006; Emond, 2003; Mota & Matos, 2010). Wekerle, Waechter, Leung, and Leonard (2007) suggested that the institutionalization affects the support network of adolescents, so most of the time, in face with the almost non-existent or discontinuous parental support, their support network is confined to figures from residential care. Siblings have been undervalued in this context, however, in a strange environment, the links to the siblings, though labile and symmetrical from the point of view of the experiences, may represent important sources of emotional stability (Bowlby, 1973; Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Some

studies are consistent with the idea that keeping siblings together in a institutional environment is associated with positive outcomes, particularly in peer relation (Smith, 1995), improved school performance (Thorpe & Swart, 1992) as well as in reducing emotional and behavioral problems (McElwain & Volling, 2005; Smith, 1998). Qualitative studies suggested that young people in residential care prefer to be together with siblings (Herrick, 2002), asking for frequent visits when that doesn't happen (Bernstein, 2000). Whiting and Lee (2003) documented reports of young people whose experience of separation from the siblings seems to have involved a significant suffering. To this extent, beyond the feeling of losing a part of themselves at the time of the separation from the siblings, many adolescents experience grief, aggravated by distress, separation anxiety and guilt in the residential care context (e.g., Morgan, Shaw, & Olino, 2012). Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, and Ashare (2005) described the importance of sibling relationships, suggesting that for children being removed from their parents, the continued presence of siblings may be vital for maintaining a sense of safety and emotional continuity in an unknown and potentially frightening situation. In addition, for a child entering foster care, the loss of one's parents may be compounded by the simultaneous loss of one's siblings. They advocated for keeping siblings together based on the fact that strong associations between the quality of sibling relationships and child developmental outcomes have been observed in non-maltreating families and thus the sibling relationship should not be ignored in families with children in care.

Also, it was observed that in the residential care group, siblings were significantly more likely to be separated when the sibling group was larger, when children and their parents were older, when there was a greater age gap between siblings, and when placement changes had been more frequent and recent. On the other side, children from smaller sibling groups were more likely to be placed with all of their siblings, younger siblings were more likely to be placed together, as were children who entered care on the same date (Shlonsky, Webster, & Needell, 2003). Miron, Sujana, and Middleton (2013) recommended for the best interest of a child who is placed into residential care, to consider costs and benefits of disrupting primary attachments to place a young with his or her siblings. If the young has an established primary attachment relationship and the sibling relationships appear adequate and not stressful or harmful, the costs and benefits of moving the young to be placed with his or her siblings need to be carefully considered. Wojciak, McWey, and Helfrich (2013) suggested the potential protective nature of sibling relationships of 152 adolescents who have experienced trauma on the expression of internalizing symptoms. Results indicated that perceptions of sibling relationships mediated the association between trauma and internalizing problems. Specifically, having a positive perception of sibling relationship, which included perceiving the relationship as positive, having a desire for more contact, and seeing their siblings more frequently mediated the relationship between trauma and internalizing problems. These findings have important implications for youth placed in out-of-home care.

Only in special cases the literature pointed to the benefit of the separation of siblings, as suggested by some studies in the case of the existence of an excessive rivalry, blaming, abuse and/or violence in the relationship (Barth et al., 2007; Bullock & Dishion, 2002; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2010; Linares, 2006; Morgan et al., 2012) and also when there are very significant differences in age, leading to "parentification" of older siblings, compromising their emotional development (Whelan, 2003). Thus, during the process of institutionalization, it becomes relevant to assess to what extent the joint permanence of siblings can benefit their healthy development, especially if they have been neglected or abused (Drapeau, Simard, Beaudry, & Chardonneau, 2000). However, it should be noted that in most cases siblings introduce greater familiarity, mutual love and comfort during the transition, creating the opportunity to experience a secure attachment environment (Davidson-Arad & Klein, 2011; Miron et al., 2013; Whelan, 2003).

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