

# ATTACHMENT AND EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIVE SUPPRESSION PREDICT AGGRESSIVE AND RULE-BREAKING BEHAVIORS IN INSTITUTIONALIZED MALE ADOLESCENTS.

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## BACKGROUND

Male adolescents placed in residential-care (RC) are more likely to show **externalizing problems**, such as **aggressive or rule-breaking behaviors** (Castelli et al., 2017). Due to their previous adverse experiences, RC adolescents also showed **low attachment security** (Quiroga & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2016) and difficulties in **emotional regulation** (Batki, 2017), showing the tendency to use a strategy assimilable to the **expressive suppression** in the Gross' model (ES, Gross & John, 2003). Several studies highlighted that an higher security in attachment representations could have a protective role (Allen & Tan, 2016), while a major use of disadaptive emotional regulation (ER) strategies, such as ES, may increase the risk of behavioral problems (Bizzi, Castellano & Cavanna, 2016; Gullone & Taffe, 2012). To the best of our knowledge, no study investigated simultaneously the predictive role of these two variables in institutionalized adolescents, even if the **identification of risk factors for externalizing problems in residential-contexts** may have a preventive and clinical utility.

The aim of this study is to assess the risk of externalizing problems (i.e. aggressive and rule-breaking behaviors) in residential-care boys, considering attachment representations and ER' strategies as possible risk-factors (i.e. predictors).

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

21 boys aged 13-18 years ( $M = 16.3$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ), placed in residential-care due to their adverse past experiences in their birth families (65%), with 35% concomitant delinquent problems.

They were enrolled through social and mental health services for a larger multi-method research with other groups of looking-after adolescents (i.e. late-adoptees and in foster care).

### PROCEDURE

Every participant and legal care-taker signed a written informed consent before the data collection, which took place into residential houses, in two individual session for each adolescent.

The entire procedure has been approved by the Ethical Committee for the Research, University of Genoa, Italy.

### MEASURES

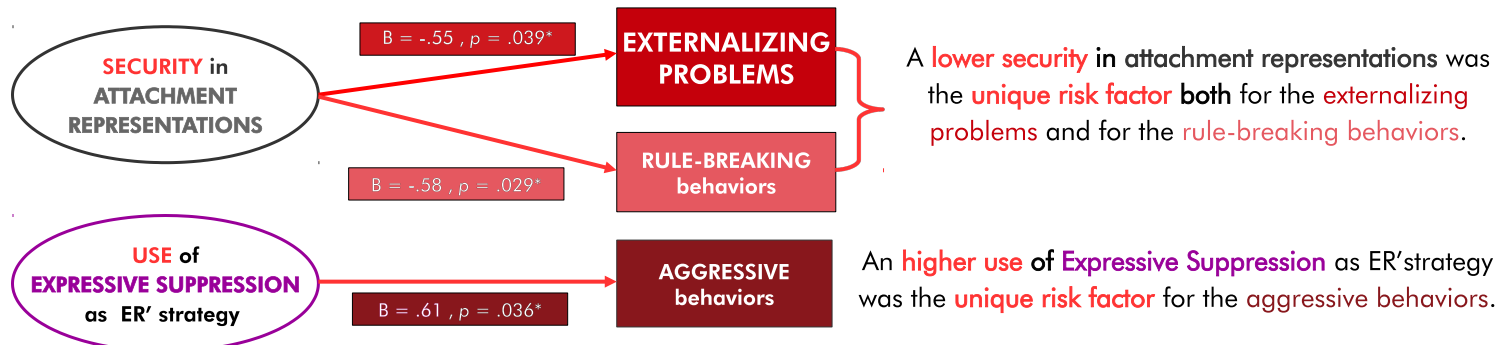
1) The **Child Behavior Checklist 6-18** (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), a parent-report questionnaire suitable for age 6-18 years, to assess the levels of emotional-behavioral problems (Internalizing, Externalizing and Total problems). For the purpose of this study, the educator of the adolescent filled the questionnaire and we considered only the scale of Externalizing problems (i.e. aggressive and behavioral problems) and the subscales of aggressive and rule-breaking behaviors.

2) The **Friends and Family Interview** (FFI; Steele & Steele, 2005; Pace, 2014) a audio-taped semi-structured interview suitable for age 10-17 years, used to assess attachment representations both in terms of classifications and corresponding scales (Secure [S]; Insecure-dismissing [Ds]; Insecure-Preoccupied [P]; Disorganized [D]).

3) The **Emotional Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents** (ERQ-CA; Gullone & Taffe, 2012) to measure the use of ER' strategies Cognitive Reappraisal (CR) and Expressive Suppression (ES).

## RESULTS

Lower levels of security in attachment representations predicted **25% of Externalizing problems** ( $adjusted-R^2 = .25$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and **28% of Rule-breaking behaviors** ( $adjusted-R^2 = .28$ ,  $p = .03$ ), showing to be the unique significant predictor. Instead, only an higher use of **Expressive Suppression** - as ER' strategy - predicted **31% of Aggressive behaviors** ( $adjusted-R^2 = .31$ ,  $p = .03$ ).



## CONCLUSIONS

Results highlighted that both low security in attachment representations and an higher use of a disadaptive emotional regulation strategy, such as expressive suppression, may be risk factors for externalizing symptoms in RC adolescents, like in normative peers (Allen & Tan, 2016; Gullone & Taffe, 2012).

However, these risk factors showed different impact on different kind of symptoms, because in this study the security of attachment did not show relations with aggressive behaviors, contrasting results of other studies (Batki, 2017), while Expressive Suppression was related only to aggressive behaviors, whereas other studies found relations with a wider range of externalizing symptoms (Bizzi et al., 2016). These controversial results may be further investigated.

Overall, we would suggest the preventive utility, in order to reduce the externalizing symptoms of residential-care boys, either to promote their secure attachments and to reduce their use of ER strategies with possible long-term negative outcomes, such as ES.

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