The role of childhood family experiences on close relationships and loneliness of Romanian youth

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Romantic relationships embed multiple psychosocial functions, providing a critical social context for preparing youth for successful relationships in later life (Connolly and McIsaac 2008). More specifically, romantic attractiveness, sexual involvement and commitment to a steady relationship represent markers of development in adolescence, as they are central milestones for a harmonious transition to adulthood aimed at procreation and transfer of well-being to the next generation (Seiffge-Krenke 2003; Shulman and Scharf 2000).

A random sample of 3513 Romanian students completed the first wave of the online self-administered Outcome of Adolescence Questionnaire. Data were collected from January 2012 until February 2013. Only respondents who currently had a partner (either sexual or only romantic) and who lived with both parents until the age of 15 were selected. This procedure resulted in a total sample of 1259 respondents. Their mean age was 18.07 years (SD = 0.48; range 17−20) and 66.6% were female.

Three scales were used as measures for intergenerational relationship quality during childhood (the period until you were 15 years old), namely „attachment to parents", „stressful relations with parents", and „family ties" (Merz and Jak 2013). The first and third dimensions were evaluated on a three point scale ranging from 1 = never to 3 = often, whereas the second dimension included a four point scale ranging from 1 = often to 4 = never. The attachment scale consisted of four indicators measuring closeness with, availability of the parents, support and understanding within the relationship with parents during childhood. The scale on stressful aspects of parent-child relationship covered four indicators for verbal and physical violence in the relationship with mother and father. The dimension of family ties was captured on a scale including three indicators covering closeness, strength, information exchange, and cohesion within relationships with family members (Table 1). Higher values on the scales indicated stronger attachment, less stress within the intergenerational relationships, respectively stronger family ties. We sumed up the scores obtained for each scale, then we calculated the mean of the scores, and splited the sample in two categories divided by the mean value. Consequently, students with scores under or equal with the mean were characterized by a lower level of attachment to the parents, a higher level of stress in the

parental home, and weaker family ties during childhood, while the opposite was true for the respondents with scores above the mean.

Regarding the quality of romantic relationship, we used one subscale selected from the triangular love scale elaborated by Lemieux and Hale in 1999 (Overbeek et al. 2007). The scale included six indicators covering different aspects of intimacy in a couple relationship. Items were answered on a seven point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Higher values on this scale indicate more satisfaction with the relationship (Table 1).

As measure for social network, we used an adapted version of the subscale on social loneliness of the De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2012) loneliness scale. This subscale consists of five items with respect to the availability of enough friends to talk to, sources of support, friends to trust and to feel close to, and friends to call when needed. These items were rated on a 3 point scale ranging from 1 = no, 2 = more or less, and 3 = yes, with the answer „more or less" indicating loneliness. Higher values on this scale indicated less loneliness. We calculated first the total score, by adding the scores attached to the five items, which could vary from 5, indicating an extreme socio-emotional loneliness, to 15, indicating a complete support from the social network of friends. Then, we calculate the mean for social loneliness, and considered the values under or equal to the mean as indicating the existence of loneliness, respectivelly the values over the mean indicating the absence of social loneliness (Table 1).

The three indicators of the quality of intergenerational relationships within parental home (attachment to parents, stressful relations with parents and family ties) were used as explanatory variables in the regression models. Romantic relationships and loneliness served as dependent variables. In our analyses we controlled for gender and age of students and for material deprivation as indicator of the socio-economic status of the family.

Two logistic regression models were conducted, one for each dependent variable (See results in Table 2). Attachment to parents, stressful relationships in the parental house and family ties during childhood play an unsignificant role in shaping the satisfaction of romantic relationships in adolescence. Only gender makes a difference, with males reporting less satisfaction within the current romantic relationship ($\beta = 0.637$, $p = 0.001$). The second model explored the factors predicting a low level of loneliness. This time, our results of logistic regression were more interesting. We found that low attachment to parents and severe material deprivation in the family of origin reduce almost by half the chance to avoid loneliness ($\beta = 0.622$, $p = 0.007$, respectively $\beta = 0.551$, $p < 0.001$). Our findings also highlighted that a high level of stress in the relationships with parents significantly increase the chance of relying in a greater extent on the social network of friends ($\beta = 1.363$, $p = 0.023$). We also noticed that younger adolescents (17 and18 years) seem to emphasize in a

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stronger manner the role of support within the network of friends (β = 1.432, p = 0.056). Family ties did not predict any influence on either satisfaction in the romantic relationship or social loneliness.

We are aware that using logistic regression is not the only solution and not the most appropriate one to study the interplay between childhood experiences in the parental home and satisfaction in the close relationships and social loneliness in adolescence. We must instead consider our demarch as a first step in exploring this dynamic relationship. We intend to repeat the multivariate analysis with the statistical methods used in the psychological field, in order to capture a more clear picture about the contribution of early childhood experiences on the quality of romantic dyads and the supportiveness of friendship networks in adolescence.

Table 1. *Inventory of indicators and descriptive statistics*

DIMENSION	ITEMS	MEAN	SD	MIN	MAX
Attachment to parents	They support and help each other. They give each other time and attention. They openly discuss and listen to each other. I feel that my family members love and take care of each other.	10.89	1.74	4	12
Stressful situations in parental home	Your parents insulted you, using bad words, nicknames. Your parents did not care about you. You got beat by your parents. Your parents said nasty things about you when other people were around.	14.39	2.26	4	16
Family ties	We undertake many activitites together. My family members have fun and laugh together. Together we are looking for solutions to solving problems.	7.88	1.39	3	9
Satisfaction with romantic partner	We share personal information with each other. I can tell everything to my (romantic) partner. My partner and I tell each other about private thoughts and feelings. My partner understands how I feel. We think the same about a lot of things. Most of the time I feel very close to my romantic partner.	36.08	7.34	6	42
Social loneliness	I can talk with my friends about my daily problems. I can lean on my friends. I can trust my friends. I feel close to my friends. I can talk to my friends about things that upset me.	12.56	2.64	5	15

Table 2. *Results of logistic regression on satisfaction in romantic relationship and low social loneliness*

Type of variables	Model 1 - Satisfaction in romantic relationship (dependent)	Model 2 - Low social loneliness (dependent)
Control variables *Gender* female (ref.) male	 1 **0.637*****	 1 0.806
Age-group 19-20 (ref.) 17-18	 1 0.903	 1 **1.432***
Severe material deprivation no (ref.) yes	 1 0.919	 1 **0.551*****
Covariates *Attachment to parents* high (ref.) low	 1 1.114	 1 **0.622****
Stressful relations with parents low (ref.) high	 1 1.122	 1 **1.363***
Family ties strong (ref.) weak	 1 0.811	 1 0.928

*** p<0.01   ** 0.01≤p<0.05   * 0.05≤p<0.1

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