

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS, ANXIETY AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract: *Provenance and socioeconomic status have a large impact over the mental health in adolescence. The aim of this research is to identify significant differences in anxiety and emotional distress between adolescents with high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status. Previous research highlighted that low socioeconomic status is related to mental illness, stereotypes, low self-esteem, poor school-based social status, a feeling of hopelessness and high levels of anxiety and depression. A sample of 360 adolescents was assessed with Emotional Distress Profile (PDE), Endler's Anxiety Scales (EMAS-T) and a Socioeconomic status screening, made by the author. Results show, on one hand, that adolescents with low socioeconomic status have higher levels of both anxiety and emotional distress, and on the other hand, that anxiety strongly correlates with emotional distress. Practical implications of this research regard the self-assessment in adolescence, the better understanding of the role of socioeconomic status in one's subjective assessment of social rank, the importance of this assessment dimension in the development of autonomy and self-esteem, and the importance of these results for the development of effective interventions to improve the adolescent's mental health.*

Key words: *Emotional distress; anxiety; socioeconomic status; adolescence.*

1. Adolescence and development

Adolescence is a developmental stage that represents the border between childhood and adulthood (Sion, 2007). Adolescence can be a difficult time that can be characterized by a constant pursuit of a committed and consistent self-identity, which is one of the most important developmental tasks, as so many researchers have highlighted over time (Rose, 2012; Perkins, 2001; Arrington Sanders, 2013; Crosnoe & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2011).

Development in adolescence is influenced by genetic, social, educational, cultural and geographical factors. These multiple influences make adolescence suitable for an integrative approach, in an attempt to understand the changes that occur during this developmental stage. Regarding the main traits of adolescence, the literature describes the following features that develop during this stage (Crețu, 2005, 2009; Adams & Berzonsky, 2009; Santrock, 2003; Tsai, 2012; Walker Russ,

2004; Verza & Verza, 2000; Bonchiș, 2004; Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, Lewin-Bizan, Gestdottir & Brown-Urban, 2011):

- abstract mental entities (knowledge, processes, skills and metacognition);
- the fulfillment of reasoning, by reaching the formal thinking stage;
- the dominance of hypothetic reasoning, the development of the ability of analyzing consequences;
- decision making skills, the critical and creative thinking;
- the enlargement of memory skills, of its active character and of the ability to correlate different information from various fields;
- the convergence of thinking and imagination and the development of the ability to create original products;
- the vocabulary, speech and dialogue skills, nonverbal communication skills;
- the ability of analyzing their personality, of acknowledging their complex emotions, of introspection;
- the strengthening of feelings, like honor, pride, dignity, self-respect, contempt or vanity;
- the interest for a certain career and vocation;
- the ability to set goals and achieve them through sustained efforts;
- gaining of independence and autonomy, exerting the ability to make choices, to self-govern and self-regulate;
- shaping a self-identity, a self-image and self-esteem;
- exercising roles and statuses;
- be part of different peer groups.

2. Social status and social class in adolescence

The term *status* means the position of a certain person or group in the society (Baudon, 1981, apud Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998). Max Weber was the theorist that gave this term the significance of social prestige and considered that it can be examined through a ratio between political and social involvement of a person. His entire theory privileges analysis of social relationships in the competition for social and political power (Gane, 2005). Based on this theory it can be seen that economic features were those that usually determined status, on one hand, and status can be used as a strategy for economic growth.

For Ralph Linton (1936, apud Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998), status means a collection of rights and responsibilities that an individual can have, based on his position in society. Every status is related to a certain reputation. And so, some statuses can be more valuable than others, and may bring their owners great advantages. Furthermore, people are usually judged and identified according to a basic status, which is a key-status based on which other statuses are interpreted (Bulgaru, 2003).

Voinea & Bulzan (2006) speak of various approaches of this concept: (1) the sociologic approach – Talcott Parsons highlights the complexity of statuses, talking about pairs like: doctor-patient, teacher-student, father-son, etc.; (2) the psychological approach – Jean Stoetzel emphasizes that status is an ensemble of behaviors that we can legitimately expect from others; (3) the anthropological and cultural approach – Ralph Linton suggests that status is a collection of rights. As stated before, adolescence is a critical stage in which teens desire to achieve independence from parental authority, while they strive to make their own decisions. Young boys and girls face a multitude of constraints and responsibilities, incongruent due to the difference in biological and social maturation. If biological growth starts as early as 11 years old, the social development bursts somewhat later in life. Adolescents are consumers of financial resources during this whole stage. They usually don't participate in their family income, and this fact means that they don't own a socioeconomic status. Their status is usually transferred from their parents.

Socioeconomic status and social class is a measure of the combination between education, income and occupation. In Romanian society, the image of the adult is superposed on the one of the adolescent. The position of young men and women in their peer groups differs from one individual to another. While some adolescents may be leaders and enjoy their popularity, others are ignored or rejected.

In our society, the most accepted stratification system speaks about the existence of the next social classes (Marica, 2007): the upper class is represented by the very rich people; the middle class (*the white collars*) is represented by intellectuals, businessmen, teachers, doctors, etc.; the working class (*the blue collars*) is represented by people that perform manual labor; the lower class is represented by those that strive to survive and usually live in inhuman conditions. Social class influences the adolescent's life style and health condition. Health is an influencing factor that can allow a person to be part of the labor market, in order to ensure the needed income for satisfying his or her needs.

Social roles in lower classes are better outlined, since stereotypically, women take care of their children and of the household, while men are the ones that provide for their family. Parents tend to be more authoritative in lower classes, opposing a more democratic parenting style that characterizes the upper classes (Marica, 2007).

In conclusion, although adolescent's life differs based on the social class they belong to, the way that each individual acts and manages his life may allow him to accede higher or lower levels in the social hierarchy.

3. Emotional distress and anxiety in adolescence

Pașca (2006) suggests that emotional distress is a type of stress that disorganizes human conduct and has destructive effects of life satisfaction.

Emotional distress is the degree of physiological, psychological and behavioral deviation of an individual from his normal and healthy functioning. Emotional distress may be the expression of failure, of a failed confrontation between pathogens and people.

Emotional distress may be observed by different behavioral symptoms, such as (Gissens, 1990, apud Jelescu & Savca, 2009): impulsivity, irritability, inertia, somatic commotions, negative transformations in the quality of psychic processes, mood swings, and shifts in volitional efforts, motivation, behavioral contradictions and affected communication skills.

The most common stress factors in adolescence are (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009):

- biological changes of the adolescent's body,
- high expectations of the educational institutions,
- inferiority complexes regarding their own person,
- conflicts with teachers and friends,
- lack of balance in relationship with their family and the society,
- separation from their parents due to divorce or the departure of the parent in foreign countries,
- the existence of ill members of the family,
- frequently changing the schools,
- the satiation caused by extracurricular activities,
- financial problems,
- physical or sexual abuse.

Another incapacitating trait in adolescence is anxiety, which can be defined as insecurity (Sillamy, 1996), as an emotion generated by a peril, perceived as hard to foresee and control (Doron & Parot, 2006). Anxiety is related to fear, concern, neuroticism, panic, tension and agitation, that block an individual from his normal functioning and affects his life by creating discomfort (Fensterheim & Baer, 1984, apud Holdevici, 2011).

Golu (2010) states that adolescence is a stage of conflict, rebellion, anguish, stress, pressure and anxiety, derived from all the physical, emotional, cognitive and social transformations. During this stage, anxiety determines the inhibition of the behavior, the lessening of the own resources, the weakening of the efficiency and the emergence of communication difficulties.

4. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective of the research is the identification of differences of anxiety and emotional distress, based on the socioeconomic status of adolescents. The hypotheses are:

1. We presume there are significant differences between adolescents with low socioeconomic status and high socioeconomic status regarding emotional distress.

2. We presume there are significant differences between adolescents with low socioeconomic status and high socioeconomic status regarding anxiety.
3. We presume there is a significant correlation between anxiety and emotional distress.

5. Sample and methods

The research was conducted in 2 stages. In the first stage, the sample consisted in 780 adolescents that were assessed with a Socioeconomic status screening made by the author. Based on the scores they obtained, we divided the sample into three categories: adolescents with high, medium and low socioeconomic status. In the second stage we used radicalized groups (see Sîntion & Călin, 2014) of adolescents with high and low socioeconomic status, that were assessed with Emotional Distress Profile (PDE) and Endler's Anxiety Scales (EMAS-T) from Cognitrom Assessment System. The sample consisted in 360 adolescents, 154 male and 206 female, from Constanța and Tulcea, aged between 17 and 19 years. The ethics of this study were ensured by obtaining the written consent of the participants and their tutors, as well as of the school principals.

The Socioeconomic status screening investigated aspects like: the frequency of trips, the popularity, the income, the ability to make decisions, the acquisition of expensive clothing, gadgets, the access to education and medical facilities, the position in the group of peers, the academic performances.

Emotional Distress Profile (PDE) is a questionnaire used to assess dysfunctional emotions, like fear and sadness and Endler's Anxiety Scales (EMAS-T) measures anxiety as a psychological trait.

6. Results

- 1) **Hypothesis 1** - *We presume there are significant differences between adolescents with low socioeconomic status and high socioeconomic status regarding emotional distress.* We obtained an asymmetric distribution of scores and we used Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples. We obtained a mean rank of 32.58 for adolescents with high socioeconomic status and a mean rank of 45.42 adolescents with low socioeconomic status. The difference is significant at .000 ($p=.01$), meaning that adolescents with low socioeconomic status are more stressed than adolescents with high socioeconomic status.
- 2) **Hypothesis 2** - *We presume there are significant differences between adolescents with low socioeconomic status and high socioeconomic status regarding anxiety.* We obtained an asymmetric distribution of scores and we used Mann-Whitney U Test for independent samples.

We obtained a mean rank of 28.12 for adolescents with high socioeconomic status and a mean rank of 66.37 adolescents with low socioeconomic status. The difference is significant at .000 ($p=.01$), meaning that adolescents with low socioeconomic status are more anxious than adolescents with high socioeconomic status.

- 3) **Hypothesis 3** - *We presume there is a significant correlation between anxiety and emotional distress.* We used Spearman correlation coefficient. Its value (.453) is statistically significant at .000 ($p=.01$), which means that emotional distress and anxiety strongly correlate.

7. Discussion

The main objective of the research, the identification of differences of anxiety and emotional distress, based on the socioeconomic status of the participants, was achieved.

The first hypothesis identified significant differences between adolescents with low and high socioeconomic status, with the first ones more stressed than the others. Low socioeconomic status may cause negative emotional reactions due to the fact that needs cannot be properly satisfied. In Romanian rural areas, the socioeconomic development is scarce. Poverty is a real problem. There are situations of families that cannot satisfy even their basic needs, like food or shelter. Another category of needs regard the social status. Low income families belong to low social classes and their children cannot enjoy a better social position. Adolescents with parents that have a medium or high socioeconomic status have more resources as their disposal to manage difficulties in life and stressful situations (Moilanen & Shen, 2014).

They are usually stigmatized, judged and rejected by their peers. Băban (1998) states that popularity is a measure of social status. A rejected or partially integrated adolescent may endure negative emotions due to rejection, injustice and aggressive behavior of peers. Statistics show that rejected adolescents have a greater suicide risk. Furthermore, a study conducted by Green, Leyland, Sweeting & Benzeval (2013) shows that low socioeconomic status adolescents are predisposed to smoking and alcohol consuming at very low ages. Furthermore, many participants in the study come from families where parents (fathers usually) have great problems of exaggerated alcohol use, which put an awful lot of stress on the children. This kind of environment can affect the adolescents, making them more vulnerable and supporting the belief that they will never be able to change their life.

Another important aspect of high emotional distress among low socioeconomic status adolescents is the lack of money and decent incomes. Poverty can provoke conflicts in the family, attachment problems between adolescents and their parents, a general stressful lifestyle that can affect the adolescent's view over life and society.

The second hypothesis identified significant differences between adolescents with low and high socioeconomic status, with the first ones more anxious than the others. Anxiety can be the effect of different errors in processing information, which make people view different factors as unknown, unclear or menacing (Calvo & Cano Vindel, 1997, apud Boncu & Nastas, 2015).

Being a psychological trait, anxiety may appear in many occasions in life, and may support the emergence of anxiety disorders (Boncu & Nastas, 2015). It has two dimensions: cognitive and emotional-physiological. The cognitive dimension allows the emergence of uncertainty, of helplessness or of inferiority complexes. The emotional and physiological dimension comprises physical reactions like tension or sweat. Daniel David (2015) suggests that Romanian adolescents are less anxious than American teenagers, but anxiety is caused by different factors. In Romania, especially social processes and economic factors seem to favor the development of anxiety. This supports our results that show that teenagers with high socioeconomic status are far less anxious than adolescents with low socioeconomic status. Low income and poverty are definitely influencing factors. In the context of peer pressure, school environment, ambition, comparisons or family problems, anxiety in low social classes is greater.

In many situations, social status is a required condition to be accepted in a group. Not having enough money can generate stigmatization and rejection by peers, and also supports the bullying phenomenon. High socioeconomic status adolescents have access to the necessary resources that allow them to feel free to make mistakes, to begin all over again. In opposition, low socioeconomic status adolescents may fear wrong choices or missing certain opportunities in life. Furthermore, high socioeconomic status is an influencing factor of the development of positive self-esteem. Anxiety may also appear in the process of constructing the ideal self, by becoming a barrier in achieving a desired personal image. Obstacles that adolescents have to overcome while building their identity can also generate anxiety.

Furthermore, relationships in families with economic and financial problems are not always harmonious, because lack or low income generates stress and conflicts between family members. Thus, frequent conflicts between parents may be another cause of anxiety in adolescence.

Another explanation regards the national assessments and tests that adolescents have to take at the end of high school. Usually, high socioeconomic status adolescents have better results and performances, which allow them to access higher education institutions. In doing so, they can more easily prepare themselves for a profession. Low socioeconomic status adolescents may not have the necessary resources to go to a university and this is a reason for them not being able to get a well-paid job later in life. This conclusion is supported by Vernon & McMahon (2010) that state that people who don't have parental and economic satisfaction lose their reputation and experience anxiety.

The third hypothesis identified strong positive correlations between emotional distress and anxiety, fact that is also supported by other studies (Fumiko, Kurebayashi, Prado & da Sliva, 2012; Tudoran & Furtunescu, 2013; Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983; Misra & McKean, 2000; Rawson, Bloomer & Kendall, 1994). The two variables support each other and often can be mistaken for one another (Robu, 2011). Adolescents are a vulnerable category as they can face a feeling of diminished self-efficacy caused by both anxiety and emotional distress.

Conclusion

This study shows that socioeconomic status is a key-element that makes a difference between adolescents. The importance of the provenience environment and of the social and economic factors for the mental health of adolescents is highlighted. Furthermore, this study has other practical implications as follows:

- the importance of counseling in adolescence, provided by school psychologists and teachers,
- the development of a positive self-esteem, of healthy coping mechanisms and of autonomy in adolescence may be a key in managing stress and anxiety,
- the development of school programs that can enable adolescents to increase their resilience, at both organizational and personal level,
- the involvement of social and political institutions in the economic development of the rural areas in Romania, through better policies and programs,
- the importance of family support and a better cooperation and communication with adolescents,
- the importance of social mobility in allowing equal access and rights for all young people,
- the importance of adolescent's mental health for the future adult's wellbeing,
- the minimisation of the bullying phenomenon, the development of tolerance and acceptance of others among young people, starting in schools and continuing at societal level.

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