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VIVENDO EM FAMÍLIA OU EM INSTITUIÇÃO: A EXPERIÊNCIA ÓTIMA, METAS E DESAFIOS NA VIDA DE ADOLESCENTES¹

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RESUMO: A influência das relações familiares no comportamento e desenvolvimento de adolescentes tem sido amplamente investigada. Este estudo examina a relação entre a estrutura familiar e a qualidade das experiências de adolescentes nas atividades diárias e contextos sociais, e a percepção que eles têm das influências em suas vidas, de seus desafios e metas. Para atingir estes objetivos, Flow Questionnaire e o Life Theme Questionnaire foram aplicados a 50 adolescentes italianas (15-21 anos), 25 vivendo em famílias com ambos os pais, 25 em Instituições Abrigo. Os dados sugerem que a percepção dos adolescentes de um ambiente familiar positivo e acolhedor incentiva a busca por atividades diárias desafiadoras e agradáveis e o envolvimento em contextos sociais produtivos. Ao contrário, uma percepção negativa da família está relacionada com falta de engajamento e motivação e a prevalência de atividades com baixo índice de desafio como fonte de divertimento e satisfação. Os resultados, apesar de se ter uma amostra pequena que não permite generalizações, confirmam o papel crucial da família no influenciar o desenvolvimento psicológico e comportamental dos adolescentes.

Palavras-chave: Adolescentes, experiência familiar, desenvolvimento.

LIVING AT HOME OR IN INSTITUTION: ADOLESCENTS' OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE AND LIFE THEME

ABSTRACT: The influence of family relationships on adolescents' behavior and development has been widely investigated. This study examines the relationship between family structure and adolescents' quality of experience in daily activities and social contexts, and their perceived life influences, challenges and goals. To achieve this aim, Flow Questionnaire and Life Theme Questionnaire were administered to 50 Italian girls (15-21 years of age), 25 living in two-parent families, 25 entrusted to Institutions for Custody of Minors. The findings suggest that adolescents' perception of a positive and supportive family environment fosters the active search for challenges and enjoyment in daily activities, and the involvement in productive and social contexts. On the contrary, negative family perception is related to lack of engagement and motivation, and to the prevalence of low-challenge activities as sources of enjoyment and satisfaction. Although the sample size does not allow us to draw conclusions about causality, the results confirm the crucial role of family in influencing adolescents' psychological and behavioral development.

Key words: Adolescents, family experience, development.

Introduction

The key role of family relationships in the individual development has been widely assessed in the psychological literature. Both the family structure (intact vs. divorced, one-parent families, presence of step-parents) and the quality of interaction deeply

affect the construction of the attachment relationship, and the healthy development of children and adolescents (Simons, Johnson, Beaman & Conger, 1996; Sokol-Katz, Dunham & Zimmerman, 1997).

More specifically, the intensity and quality of parents-children communication contributes to the social integration as well as to the identity definition of the adolescent, providing behavioral models, basic values, guidelines in the identification and pursuit of the main life goals (Hirschi, 1969; Noller, 1995).

Conversely, malfunction in family

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relationships can seriously affect children's behavior. Research studies show that troubled communication within the family is a risk factor for adolescent deviant behavior (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996). Similar consequences derive from parental pathology, physical aggression and alcoholism (Osuna, Alarcón & Luna, 1992). As Sameroff, Seifer e Bartko have stated (1997), several intra-familial risk factors can be identified in dealing with adolescent maladjustment, and their effect on teenager's behavior is additive: the more risk factors the worse the outcomes. Other studies have highlighted the peculiar effect of psychological maltreatment, which turns to be one of the most predictive risk factors for maladjustment (McGee, Wolfe & Wilson, 1997).

Super e Harkness (1986) analyze family as one of the key components of the developmental niche, which comprises the set of factors influencing individual growth and behavior: the natural and cultural daily environment, the culturally-based child rearing practices, and the psychology and behavior of the caretakers. Similarly, within the bio-cultural approach (Durham, 1991; Massimini, 1982; Richerson & Boyd, 1978; Ruyle, 1973), individual behavior throughout the life span is investigated as the result of combined influences arising from the biological and cultural inheritance systems.

However, individuals play an active role in the interaction with the environment, differentially replicating in the daily life some of the available cultural information units – activities, interests, relationships, values. This process has been defined psychological selection (Csikszentmihalyi & Massimini, 1985), and it is guided by the quality of experience perceived in dealing with environmental opportunities for action. Attention and psychic resources are preferentially invested in situations associated with a positive and complex state of consciousness. In the literature on children's behavior this tendency has often been observed. Examples can be found in the research works on optimal discrepancy (Piaget, 1972), play (Garvey, 1977) and learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982): Whenever possible, children avoid environmental stimuli or situations producing anxiety or boredom, while selectively directing their attention toward opportunities for action providing positive experiences. In this perspective, particularly relevant is the work of

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1978, 1985), who first identified and described optimal experience, or Flow.

Optimal experience is primarily characterized by the perception of high environmental challenges, matched by adequately high personal skills. Moreover, individuals report high levels of concentration, involvement, merging with the task at hand, unselfconsciousness, control of the situation, clear-cut feedback on the course of the activity. High values of affect and enjoyment are described, as well as intrinsic motivation, i.e. the involvement in the task for its own sake, regardless of extrinsic rewards or social approval (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Several cross-cultural studies, which provided data from about 4,000 subjects, have shown the widespread occurrence of optimal experience, and the recurrence of its psychological features in different social and cultural contexts, independently of participants' age and gender (Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000).

Most of the daily activities can be associated with optimal experience. The only basic prerequisite is that they provide sufficiently high level of challenges to require an active engagement, and the use of adequately high personal skills. Repetitive and very easy tasks are almost never quoted as sources of optimal experience. On the contrary, creative and demanding activities in every domain – work, leisure, social interactions – are widely reported.

Individuals are open bio-cultural and psychic systems, who exchange information with the environment in order to attain progressively higher levels of complexity (Csanyi, 1988, 1995; Khalil & Boulding, 1996; Prigogine, 1995; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991). The perception of high environmental challenges promotes the increase of related skills. In this perspective, optimal experience fosters development: Through the preferential replication of the associated activities, individuals will look for more and more complex opportunities for action, improving personal abilities in order to face them. Thanks to this intrinsically dynamic structure, optimal experience leads to the selective cultivation of individual skills in specific activities, thus influencing the process of psychological selection, and the developmental path. It contributes to the identification and building of the Life Theme, which comprises the basic life goals and lifelong targets each individual uniquely selects and pursues

(Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979).

This paper aims at analyzing the quality of adolescents' daily experience, the unfolding of psychological selection and the building of individual life theme as a function of family structure and relationships. For this purpose, a comparative research study was conducted between a group of adolescent girls living in intact families, and a group of girls entrusted to communities and institutions for the Custody of Minors.

Sample and Procedures

The sample comprised 50 Italian adolescent girls. 25 of them belonged to intact families, all lived at home and were students in a high school. The other 25 were entrusted to Institutions for Custody of Minors, because of severe family problems and individual maladjustment. They lived in small residential communities, whose programs aimed at building personal relationships between educators and adolescents, and at promoting the individual adjustment and integration in the social context. Contacts with the parents were frequent, and - if possible and advisable - the adolescents could join their families during weekends. Among these girls, 14 (56%) were high school students, 9 (36%) had a full-time job, 2 attended school in the morning and had a part-time occupation in the afternoon. In their family background different forms of deviant behavior were detected: parental alcoholism, drug addiction, sexual and/or physical violence, psychiatric syndromes, prostitution and crime. Table 1 shows the age distribution in the two groups.

Table 1: Age distribution in the two adolescent groups

Age range	Living at home (N=25) ^a	Institutionalized (N=25) ^a
14-16	11 (44%)	16 (64%)
17-19	13 (52%)	7 (28%)
20-21	1 (4%)	2 (8%)

The participants were administered two research tools, developed in order to investigate the quality of experience in daily life and activities, and the features of individual life theme.

Specifically, in the Flow Questionnaire each girl was asked to read three quotations describing

optimal experience, and to indicate if she ever experienced something similar. If the answer was yes, the respondent was invited to quote those activities in her life which were associated with this kind of experience. Likert-type scales scoring cognitive, affective and motivational variables provided information on the subjectively perceived features of optimal experience, and on the quality of experience associated with the main daily domains, such as study, work, family (for a more detailed description of the Flow Questionnaire, see Delle Fave & Massimini, 1988, 1991; Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & Delle Fave, 1988).

The Life Theme Questionnaire (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979) provided information on participants' positive and negative life influences, present challenges, future goals.

Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of the activities associated with optimal experience by the two groups of adolescents.

As concerns the percentage of respondents in the two groups, 24 (96%) of the adolescents living at home recognized optimal experience in their life, while only 20 institutionalized girls (80%) did. Moreover, in identifying the associated activities the former group provided 70 answers (an average of 2.9 per participant), the latter a much lower number (39, mean=1.9 per participant).

The activity categories associated with optimal experience also differed between the two groups (Fig.1). Sports and hobbies were the most frequent category reported by the girls living at home (30% of the responses). Studying (18.6%), reading (15.7%) and media (12.9%) came next. The institutionalized adolescents reported socialization and peer interaction as the main sources of optimal experience (25.6% of the answers); media (23.1%), being with the boyfriend and sports and hobbies (both with 12.8%) followed.

When asked to rate the psychological features of optimal experience on Likert type scales, the two groups substantially overlapped. As Table 2 shows, on scales ranging from 0 to 8 most average values were above 6, confirming theoretical expectations and previous research findings. No significant difference was detected between the ratings of the two groups.

Figure 1

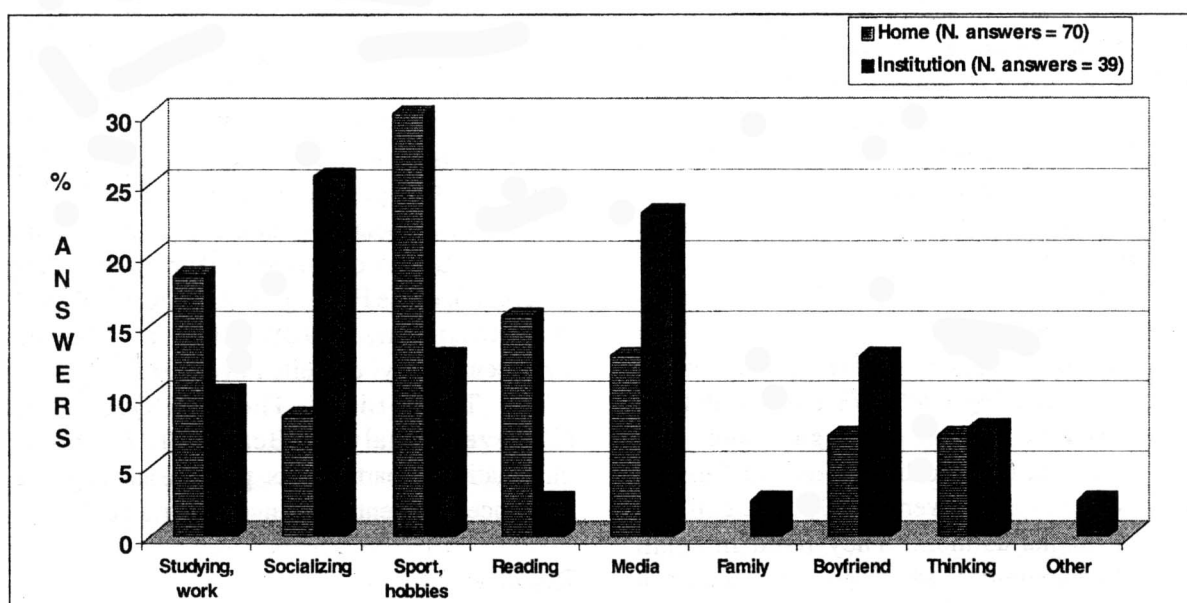


Table 2: The psychological features of optimal experience in the two groups of adolescents

Variables	Living at home (N=24) ^a		Institutionalized (N=20) ^a	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Involvement	6.6	1.9	6.7	1.5
Clear ideas	6.5	2.1	5.9	2.0
Intrinsic Motivation	6.2	2.5	5.9	2.8
Excitement	6.9	2.1	7.2	1.0
Enjoyment	6.7	1.9	6.5	1.8
Focus of attention	5.6	2.7	6.6	1.8
Relaxation	5.8	2.7	5.1	3.3
Clear goals	6.1	2.6	5.3	2.4
Control of situation	6.2	2.3	5.4	2.4
Challenges	6.1	2.7	6.4	2.5
Skills	5.9	2.5	5.7	2.3

^a N = number of participants

On the contrary, the quality of experience associated with family interaction showed remarkable differences between the girls living at home and the institutionalized ones. In Figure 2 the psychological features of family interactions are compared in the two groups.

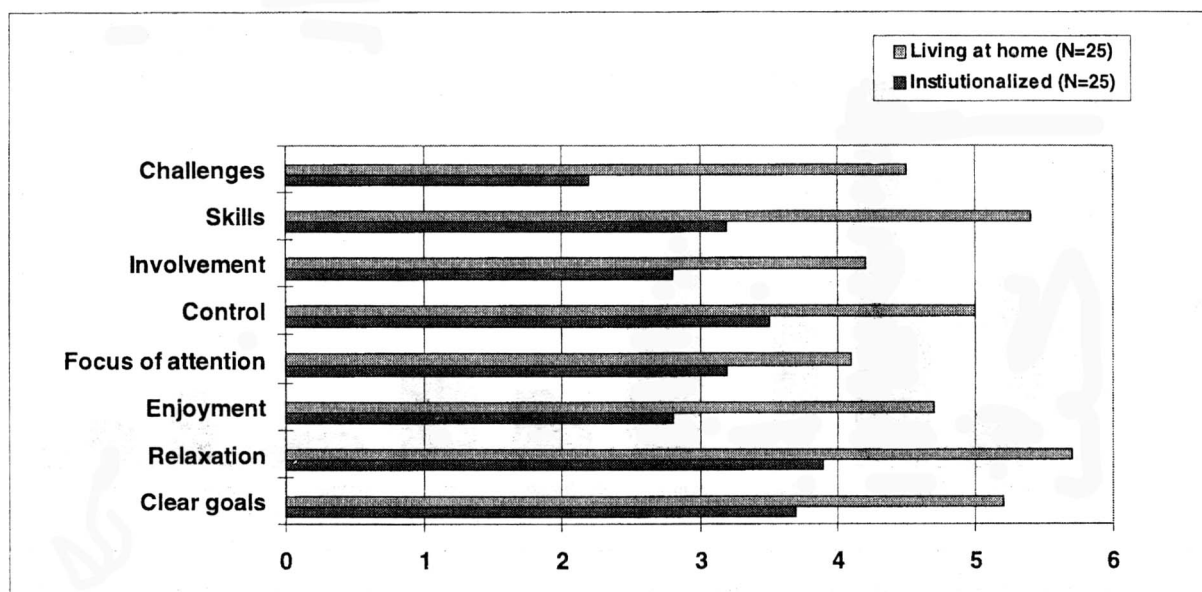
Adolescents in institutions perceived the experience with family as globally worse than girls living at home did. A non-parametric ANOVA

detected significantly lower levels of skills ($F=8.6$, $p<.006$), challenges ($F=10.9$, $p<.002$), enjoyment ($F=9.4$, $p<.004$) and control of the situation ($F=4.1$, $p<.05$), higher levels of anxiety ($F=6.8$, $p<.02$) and the lack of clear goals ($F=5.0$, $p<.03$).

Differences in the two groups were also found in the answers to the open-ended question 'What do you mean with being with family?'. Some of the descriptions provided by the participants are reported below:

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Figure 2



«Being with my family above all means to share the most ordinary moments as if they were not ordinary. However, it also implies a certain amount of limitation to individual freedom» (18-year-old, home)

«It means to live in a perfectly known environment, always trying to find new things in it. To watch my brother, to try to understand my parents' mentality, so different from mine. To let them understand that my ideas are different from theirs...» (17-year-old, home)

«To spend time with people who are very close to me, whom I can talk with without being afraid of misunderstandings, who, I'm sure, love me. In some cases parents and siblings are better than friends» (16-year-old, home)

«To talk about our problems, trying to understand why there are conflicts and to find compromises» (15-year-old, institution)

«It means that we don't live together the whole week, and the weekend goes by fast» (16-year-old, institution)

«To stay with my family means trying to build up a relationship» (17-year-old, institution)

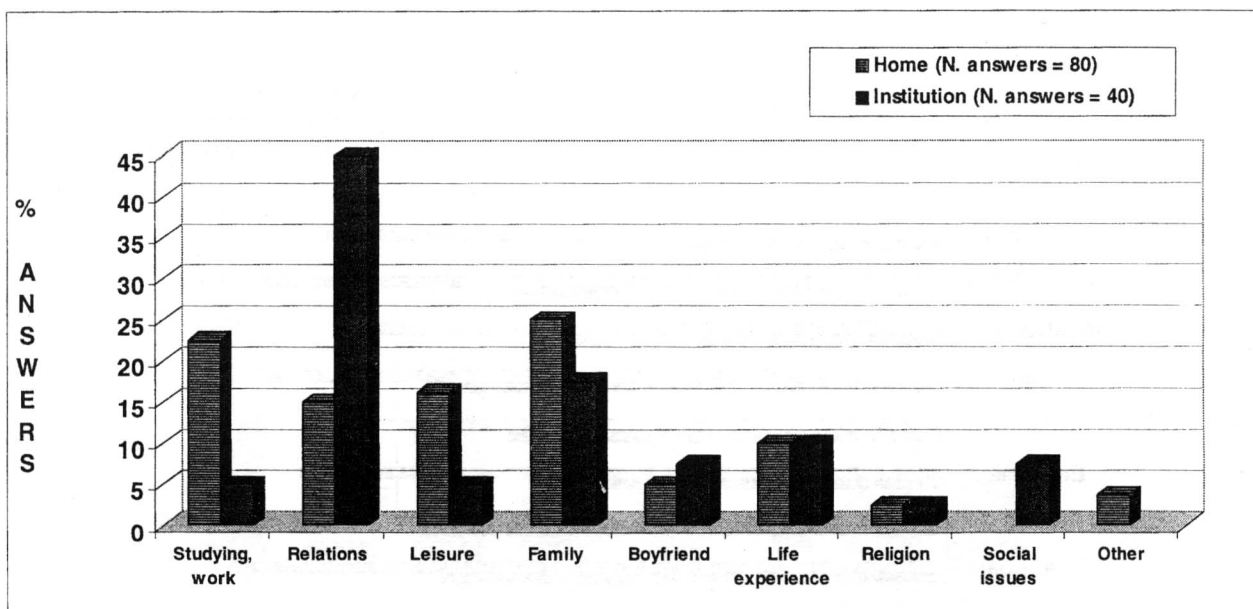
«I am very close to my family, even though I suffered because of them» (14-year-old, institution).

Girls living at home described the family interactions as part of the daily life; they perceived the family as a secure source of relationship, support and dialogue. On the contrary, institutionalized girls underlined the contrast between the ideal value and meaning of family relationships and the actually perceived quality of experience.

Further information about the role of family in the life of these adolescents was provided by Life Theme Questionnaire, which was filled out by all the 25 girls living at home, and by 16 of the institutionalized ones. Participants were first asked to list people, events, experiences which had a positive influence on their development and life history (Figure 3). Only one girl, belonging to the institutionalized group, reported not recognizing any positive influence in her life.

As shown in Figure 3, the two groups differed in the answer distribution. Almost half of the influences quoted by institutionalized girls fell into the category of social relations (45%); family (17.5%) and personal experiences (10%) followed. Adolescents living at home reported a higher variety of answers: family and study were the most frequent ones (25% and 22.5% respectively). Sports and hobbies (16.3%), social relations (15%) and personal experiences (10%) were also quoted.

Figure 3



All the institutionalized girls described some negative influences in their life (Figure 4). On the contrary, 5 out of 25 adolescents living at home reported not having experienced any negative influence.

For the institutionalized girls, family was by and large the most frequent source of troubles and difficulties: it comprised almost two thirds of the participants' answers (65.4%). Social relations came next, but in a much lower percentage (19.2%). Adolescents living at home again showed a wider range of answers: studying accounted for about one-third

of their negative influences, followed by family (18.8%) and by social relations (16.7%).

Differences between the two groups arose from their description of present and future life expectations. When asked to quote the main challenges they were facing at the present time (see Figure 5), girls living at home reported two main issues: studying, which accounted for more than half of their answers (53.6%) and self-development (25%). The pattern was reversed for girls living in institutions: their main challenge was self-development (47.4%), followed by studying, with a much lower percentage of answers (15.8%).

Figure 4

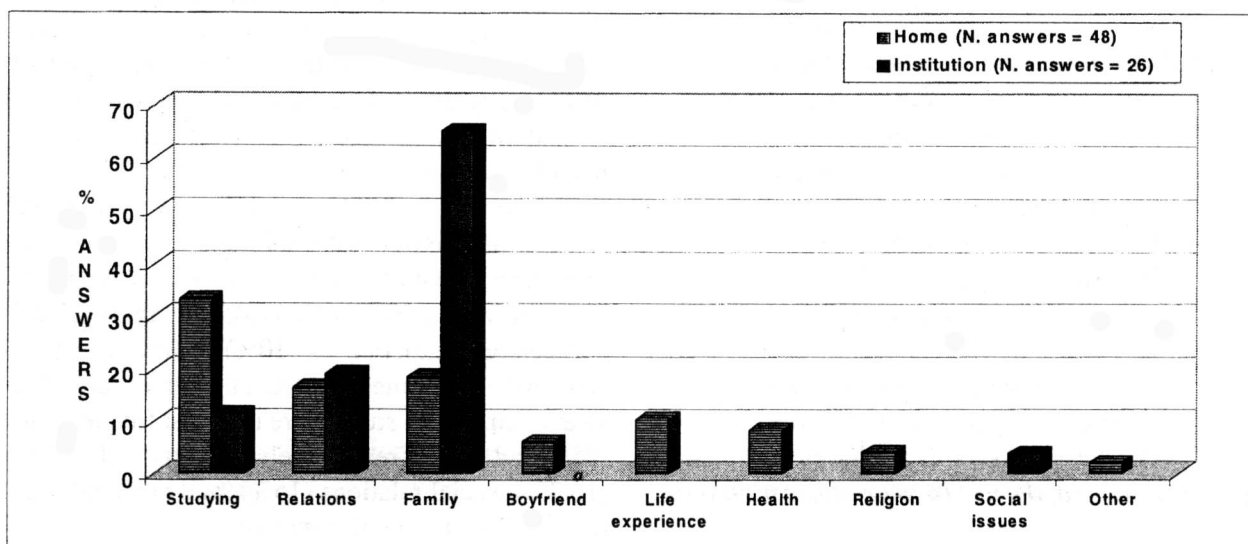
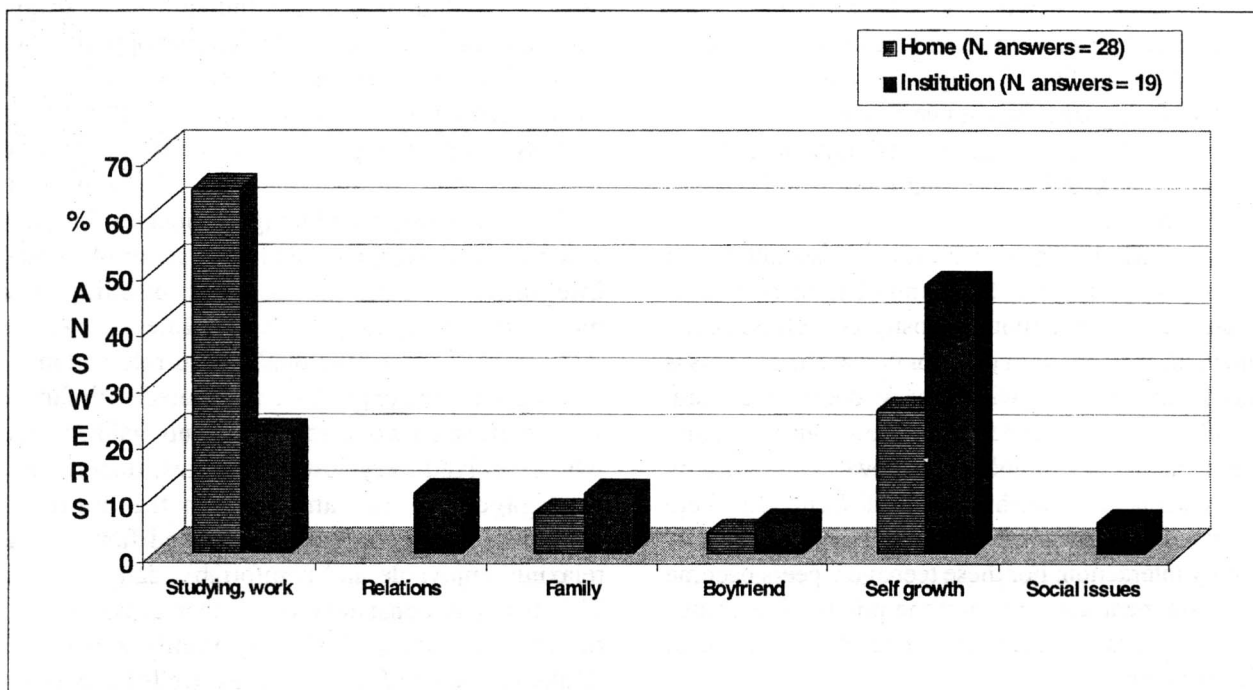


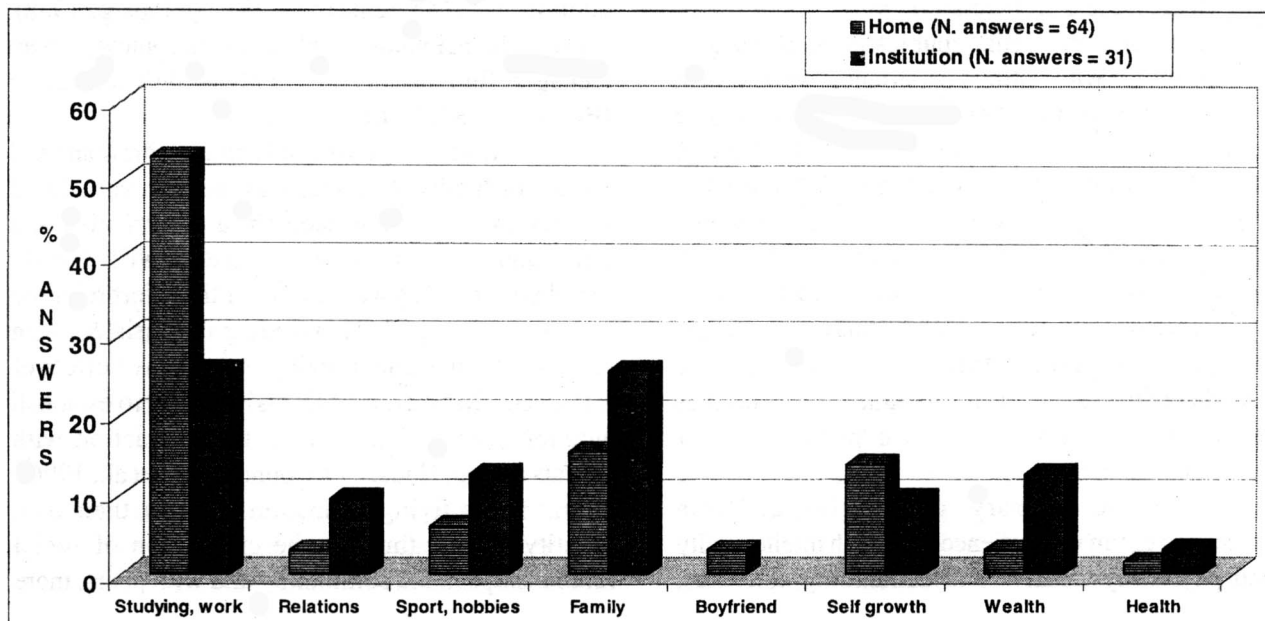
Figure 5



As Figure 6 shows, differences were also found in the kind of goals the adolescents wished to pursue in their future life. Girls living at home reported educational and professional targets in more than half of their answers (53.1%); building a family came next, but in a much lower percentage (15.6%), closely followed by self-development (14.1%). Insti-

tutionalized girls referred with similar frequency to projects involving building their own family and study/work activities (25.8% and 22.6% of the answers respectively). They put more emphasis on social relations and wealth (9.7% and 12.9% of the answers respectively) than the girls living at home did (3.1% for both categories).

Figure 6



Discussion

Interesting differences between girls living at home and girls living in institutions were detected, both in the quality of daily experience and in the setting of life goals. They suggest a remarkable impact of family relations on adolescents' adjustment to the environment and on their long-term developmental opportunities.

Girls living in institutions associated with optimal experience a lower number of activities. Moreover, these activities mostly concerned social interaction, either with peers or not specified. This is an uncommon result, within the whole cross-cultural set of samples examined with Flow Questionnaire. Nevertheless, it highlights the relevance assumed by interpersonal relationships for adolescents who were deprived of the secure base granted by a stable, daily family interaction. For these teenagers peers become the prominent advisors, and the points of reference in the process of emotional, cognitive and social development.

Another basic difference between the two groups concerns the complexity of the activities associated with optimal experience. Besides socializing, the activities quoted by the girls living in institution were characterized by a short-term relevance and a low level of complexity. These activities neither fostered the cultivation of specific skills, nor the participants' integration in the cultural environment. They rather provided the adolescents with vicarious relations, and with a way to escape a low-challenge and problematic context. For example, within the category 'media' four institutionalized girls associated TV with optimal experience, while no girl living at home did. Several studies (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Massimini, Delle Fave & Borri Gaspardin, 1992) showed that watching TV is mainly associated with passiveness, disengagement, low levels of affect and involvement. At the cross-cultural level, people very rarely report optimal experience when watching TV, and this mostly occurs in deprived cultural contexts. This result is therefore a marker of the low level and amount of opportunities for action girls in institutions are exposed to in their daily environment.

On the contrary, girls living at home associated optimal experience with both intellectually and physically creative and demanding activities.

Sports, arts, learning and reading share the common feature of a complex structure. Individuals can always find new and increasingly challenging opportunities for action in performing them, and they can subsequently improve related skills. This dynamic process toward complexity is a source of intrinsic reward by itself. At the same time, the involvement in these tasks ensures lifelong advantages, in terms of individual development and social and professional integration. It contributes to the building of a meaningful, complex and adaptive Life Theme.

As concerns the quality and role of family relationships, the experience associated with family was significantly worse for the institutionalized girls, who perceived very low challenges, uncertainty, disengagement and anxiety. On the contrary, adolescents living at home described family as a relaxing, enjoyable and comfortable daily context. This result is consistent with other cross-cultural findings on adolescents' daily family experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Delle Fave, 1998; Larson & Richards, 1994; Larson et al., 1996). Teenagers find their own way in the world, primarily investing their attention on extra-family opportunities for action (Cobb, 1996; Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). During adolescence there is a reduction in self-disclosure to parents, whereas an increasingly close relationship with peers develops (Barnes & Olson, 1985). However, the previous development of a positive attachment relationship is a prerequisite for the unfolding of exploratory behavior during adolescence (Montemayor, 1983; Steinberg, 1988). The family maintains its role as a safe context, where teenagers find relax as well as life models and advice (Bowlby, 1982; Collins, 1990).

Adolescents living in institution drew an ideal picture of family interaction, as they strove to build it; they expressed the need for a constructive and emotionally intensive relationship with family members, and they were aware of the effort required to achieve this goal. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the negative effect of family conflicts on adolescents' struggle to establish autonomy and relatedness in the interaction with parents (Allen, Hauser, O'Connor, Bell, et al., 1996).

Girls living in institution built their own identity mainly through the cultivation of social relationships in the community and with peers, more

generally through extra-familial socialization agents, who they reported among the positive influences. On the contrary, they quoted family as the prominent negative influence in their life, primarily because of the difficulties in building emotional ties with the parents, and the feeling of insecurity deriving from family break-up.

Adolescence is a challenge by itself: it is a period of change and identity construction, and teens face internal and interpersonal conflicts on the path toward adulthood. However, for the girls living at home, in a positive family context, the turmoil of teenage years was smoothed by a stable, supporting private environment: the adolescents could turn their psychic resources toward educational challenges, which would contribute to the personal development as well as the social integration of the participants. Institutionalized girls, on the contrary, had to cope with transition to adulthood by means of their own efforts only. They had to look for adult models outside the family context, in a social environment not always supportive or edifying, without guides to sufficiently rely upon. In this perspective, it is not surprising that the most frequent challenge they reported was self growth.

Finally, in the description of future life goals adolescent students living with their family pursued academic and professional achievements, in line with their present main investment of psychic energy. The finding is consistent with other cross-cultural research studies (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Patterson, Sochting & Marcia, 1992). Girls in institutions devoted an equivalent amount of attention toward work and family-related goals. This is partially due to the fact that some of them already had a job, and had accomplished the compulsory education courses. Nevertheless, their concern with their own future family, and the high amount of resources they devoted to the building of strong close relationships, could be also ascribed to the need for a stable context providing intimacy and support.

Individual development and intervention strategies

The identity formation at the personal and social levels has deep roots in the quality of family relationships. As the present study showed, the quality of experience perceived in the daily interaction with

the environment, as well as the direction and complexity of the individual developmental path are strongly influenced by family models and interaction patterns.

Psychological selection is a subjective, idiosyncratic process: an individual can be able to find opportunities for action and self expression in otherwise low-supporting contexts. However, the basic intimate relationships and the early family experiences play a key role in shaping specific developmental trajectories. The comparison between adolescents living in intact, non-conflictual families, and teenagers subtracted to disrupted and/or harmful family environments clearly highlighted the different developmental consequences of the two family structures and relations.

Of course, the very limited size of the samples, and the primarily qualitative nature of the results do not allow for any consideration about causality. However, the findings give some interesting hints of the relationship between daily quality of experience, environmental background, individual developmental and setting of life goals.

Some suggestions for intervention with maladjusted adolescents can be drawn from this investigation. The insufficient and often detrimental role played by the family has to be taken into account, in order to provide adolescents with an alternative supportive environment, fostering growth and self esteem. Communities and institutions should focus on individual potentials, and should help adolescents discover meaningful, complex opportunities for action. Individual predisposition and intrinsic motivation should be sustained, in order to promote the cultivation of adaptive and long-term relevant opportunities for optimal experience. To achieve this aim, an environment is needed which supports autonomy and the active search for meanings and goals, encouraging free involvement and the selection of challenging and socially accepted interests and activities (Levy, 1996).

The most important role of communities is to enable adolescent to pursue social integration and de-institutionalization (Arieli, Beker & Kashti, 1990). The individual's active engagement in the process is a basic prerequisite to ensure positive long-term outcomes (Oles, 1991). In the perspective of psychological selection, individual is located at the

core of the replication and transmission of bio-cultural information. Although the environment can seriously obstacle and even distort the personal development path, the adolescent's effort and ability to find a personalized way toward complexity have to be primarily supported.

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