



Secure Attachment Levels and Behavioral Problems: An Investigation Among Children in Different Out-of-Home Care.

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Introduction

Background:

- Most children in out-of-home care have faced some form of trauma, such as neglect and abuse (Tarren-Sweeney, 2008).
- Early traumatic experiences are significant risk factors for attachment and mental health issues (Blythe, 2014).
- Out-of-home care can offer positive relational experiences, potentially aiding in their recovery (Quiroga et al., 2016).

- 1 CLOSED ADOPTION**
child and birth parents not in contact following adoption
- 2 OPEN ADOPTION**
child and birth parents still in contact after placement
- 3 FOSTER CARE**
child living temporarily with relatives or unrelated foster parents
- 4 INSTITUTIONAL CARE**
child in residential care for large groups of children

Literature Gap:

Lack of studies comparing 4 different out-of-home care. This would be beneficial to guide judicial authorities in selecting the most suitable form for specific children.

Aim of the current study:

To investigate differences in secure attachment levels and behavioral problems for the first time simultaneously among 4 groups of children in out-of-home care:



Methods

Participants: N= 130 Italian children (aged 10-19)

Instruments:

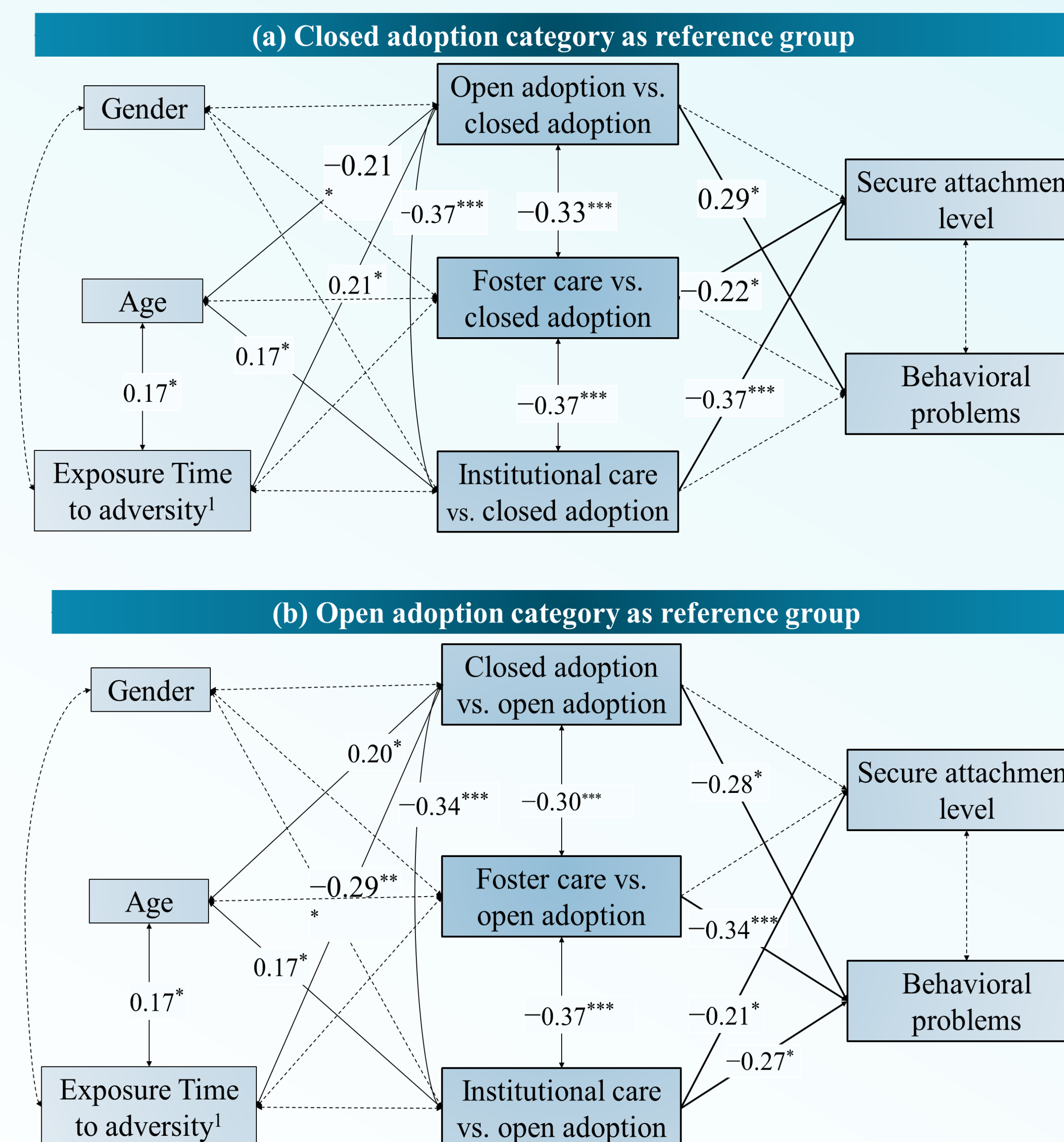
- The Attachment Interview for Childhood and Adolescence (Ammaniti et al., 2000)
- The Achenbach Youth Self-Report (Achenbach, 2005)

Analytical approach:

- **Measured variable path analysis** (to represent the four groups of out-of-home care in the model, a dummy coding approach was pursued)
- **Covariates:** Age, gender, time elapsed between the request for child protection and placement in out-of-home care (as a proxy of cumulative risks).

Descriptive Variable	Closed Adoption	Open Adoption	Foster Care	Institutional Care
Gender (N (%))				
Male	13 (46.4%)	18 (56.2%)	18 (56.2%)	22 (57.9%)
Female	15 (53.6%)	14 (43.8%)	14 (43.8%)	16 (42.1%)
Age in years (M (SD))	15.86 (1.53)	14.47 (1.87)	14.59 (2.26)	15.63 (1.40)
Range	14-18	12-18	10-19	14-18
Time in years of exposure to adversity ¹ (M (SD))	2.56 (1.57)	4.48 (2.22)	3.92 (2.23)	3.78 (1.96)
Range	0.5 to 5.1	1.5 to 6.2	0.9 to 6.0	0.7 to 5.9

Results



Discussion

1. Adolescents in closed adoption showed higher secure attachment levels than those in foster and institutional care.

Potential selection bias favoring closed adoption for children with fewer relationship problems: it's easier for them to form a secure attachment bond with the new caregivers.

2. Adolescents in open adoption scored significantly higher on problem behaviors than others.

Continuous exposure to dysfunctional families can lead to internalizing or externalizing behaviors. E.g.:

- o neglectful parent: child with anxiety and depression
- o violent parents serving as negative role models: child with conduct problems

Implications:

- ❖ **Research:** Opening doors for new research questions:
 - o investigating the moderating role of age,
 - o testing our findings' interpretations.
- ❖ **Practice:** Guiding judicial authorities in selecting the most suitable form of out-of-home care for specific children.

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