St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo
Center for Psychological Research and Counseling

1/2026

DOI: 10.54664/GYDB7925

AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTACHMENT AND ADAPTIVE CAPACITY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN SMALL SETTLEMENTS

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Ethical approval: N/A.
Conflict of interest and funding: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be considered as a potential conflict of interest.
Acknowledgements: Development of the research and model is funded by the "Mental Health Screening and Adaptive Capacity of Young People," project № КП-06-Н65/14 from 15.12.2022 of FNI – Ministry of Education
Author contribution statement: N/A

Abstract: *This paper proposes an integrative model explaining the relationship between attachment and adaptive capacity among young people living in small settlements. Grounded in attachment theory, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, and the transactional theory of stress and coping, the model assumes that contextual characteristics such as high social transparency, limited anonymity, and strong informal social control may contribute to the development of insecure attachment patterns. The relationship between attachment and adaptation is mediated by emotion regulation, cognitive beliefs, interpersonal functioning, and coping strategies. The model highlights the impact of these processes on mental health, resilience, and psychosocial functioning, while emphasizing the dynamic and non-deterministic nature of adaptation across development.*

Keywords: *attachment, adaptive capacity, emerging adulthood, small settlements, mental health, emotion regulation, coping, resilience, social support, psychosocial adaptation*

Introduction

Mental health and the adaptive capacity of young people have become subjects of increasing scientific interest in the context of contemporary social transformations. The question of how the local social environment influences the development of psychological characteristics associated with stress, coping, interpersonal functioning, and personal resilience is of particular relevance both at the individual and the societal level. In this context, small settlements (towns and villages) emerge as a distinct social ecosystem exerting a complex influence on psychosocial development.

The present integrative model aims to explain the mechanisms through which the sociocultural context of small settlements is associated with the formation of specific attachment patterns and, consequently, with variations in the adaptive capacity and mental health of young people. The model is grounded in the principles of the bioecological model of development [1], attachment theory [2], [3], and

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the theory of stress and coping [4]. Its guiding principle is the integration of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors into a unified explanatory framework.

The proposed model seeks to overcome reductionist approaches that conceptualize psychological functioning solely through the prism of personality characteristics or exclusively through the social environment. Instead, it assumes that adaptation emerges as a complex result of the dynamic interaction between the environment, internal working models of attachment, and psychological mechanisms of emotional and cognitive regulation.

Contextual Characteristics of Small Settlements

At the core of the model is the assumption that small settlements create a specific social climate that structures interpersonal interactions and influences the processes of psychosocial development. The local context is characterized by high social transparency, resembling "aquarium life," where everyone knows and observes everyone else [5]. Close, overlapping social roles and constant contact between people intensify social control in the context of stronger dependence on primary relationships, limited access to diverse social roles, institutional structures and resources, greater importance of reputation and reduced anonymity in everyday contacts.

This sociocultural organization presupposes the existence of intensive informal social control. Social roles are often intertwined, with the same individual simultaneously functioning as a neighbor, relative, colleague, and representative of a local institution. Such overlap of social positions complicates the maintenance of psychological distance and personal autonomy. At the same time, limited anonymity increases the importance of reputation and social approval.

Studies on social dynamics in small settlements in Bulgaria emphasize that these peculiarities significantly influence social behavior and individual adaptation strategies [6], [7]. International research likewise demonstrates that more homogeneous and less diversified social networks may intensify in-group conformity and sensitivity to social sanctions [8], [9].

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, these features of the microsystem create specific conditions for socialization. In small settlements, opportunities for experimentation with different social roles and identities are often more limited. The lack of sufficiently diverse social contexts may reduce experiences that foster autonomy and flexible adaptive functioning.

Interpersonal Relationships and Attachment

Attachment theory posits that early relationships with caregiving figures lead to the formation of internal working models of the self and others [2]. These models function as cognitive-emotional frameworks through which individuals interpret interpersonal relationships and regulate their behavior.

Under conditions of heightened social transparency and increased sensitivity to public evaluation, young people may develop elevated anxiety regarding acceptance and rejection. A recent Bulgarian study found that fearful attachment, combining high degree of anxiety and avoidance in interpersonal relationships, is more likely in villages and small towns than in the capital [10]. It seems that the constant visibility of behavior and the limited opportunities to diversify social roles and contacts increase the risk of developing defensive interpersonal strategies. These may manifest through suppression of self-expression, conflict avoidance, and hypersensitivity to criticism.

Of particular importance is the limited opportunity for so-called "corrective emotional experiences" — experiences capable of modifying already established insecure attachment patterns [11]. In larger social environments, individuals are more likely to establish new relationships that may alter negative expectations regarding themselves and others. In small settlements, however, social circles are often relatively stable and restricted, which may hinder such corrective processes.

On this basis, the model explains a greater likelihood of the formation or stabilization of insecure attachment styles, particularly fearful attachment. This attachment style is characterized by an internal conflict between a strong desire for closeness and a simultaneous fear of rejection and emotional injury. Individuals with fearful attachment maintain negative representations of both themselves and others. They frequently perceive themselves as unworthy of love and support, while viewing others as unpredictable, critical, or threatening.

These internal working models function as filters through which social reality is interpreted. Neutral social situations may be perceived as potentially rejecting or humiliating, thereby intensifying anxiety and interpersonal insecurity. As a result, individuals often employ contradictory strategies, simultaneously seeking closeness while avoiding emotional intimacy.

Psychological Mediators Between Attachment and Adaptation

A central premise of the integrative model is that the relationship between attachment and adaptive capacity is not direct but mediated through a system of psychological processes. These intrapsychic mechanisms determine the manner in which individuals experience stress, regulate emotions, and organize social behavior.

Emotional Regulation

One of the primary mediators is emotional regulation. Research indicates that insecure attachment is associated with difficulties in managing emotional states [12], [13]. In fearful attachment, alternating patterns of hyperactivation and deactivation of the emotional system are frequently observed. Hyperactivation is expressed through elevated anxiety, intense emotional reactions, and hypervigilance toward social cues. The individual continuously monitors the environment for signs of disapproval or rejection. Deactivation, in turn, manifests through emotional withdrawal, suppression of feelings, and avoidance of closeness as a defensive strategy. This instability in emotional regulation impairs the adequate processing of stressful experiences and reduces psychological resilience.

Negative Cognitive Beliefs

Negative cognitive schemas and core beliefs constitute a second important mediator of insecure attachment. In line with cognitive-behavioral models, internal working models of attachment influence automatic thoughts and interpretations of social situations. In insecure attachment, individuals often maintain beliefs such as “I am not good enough,” “others cannot be trusted,” or “if I become emotionally close to someone, I will be hurt.”

These cognitive structures maintain anxiety and social avoidance. They increase the likelihood that neutral events will be perceived as threatening, thereby creating a self-perpetuating cycle between expectations and behavior.

Social Behavior and Interpersonal Functioning

The combination of high levels of anxiety and avoidance is also reflected in social behavior. Individuals with a fearful attachment style frequently demonstrate ambivalent interaction patterns — they seek closeness and support but subsequently distance themselves due to fear of dependency or rejection.

This impedes the formation of stable and trusting relationships. Restricted access to secure social support is particularly significant under conditions of stress, as social connectedness represents one of the primary buffers against psychological destabilization.

Coping Strategies

From the perspective of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping [4], attachment orientations shape individuals’ preferred coping strategies when dealing with stress. According to this model, coping responses can be broadly categorized into problem-focused coping, aimed at modifying the stressful situation itself, and emotion-focused coping, aimed at regulating emotional distress. Individuals with insecure attachment patterns are more likely to employ maladaptive coping mechanisms such as avoidance, rumination, emotional suppression, and passivity. Empirical evidence indicates that both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are positively associated with dysfunctional rumination and deficits in adaptive emotion regulation. For example, in a study by Lanciano et al. [14], insecure attachment dimensions significantly predicted brooding and depression-related rumination, with emotional intelligence abilities partially mediating these relationships. Research further demonstrates that avoidantly attached individuals are more likely to rely on expressive suppression, emotional disengagement, and deactivating regulation strategies, whereas anxiously attached individuals tend to employ hyperactivating strategies characterized by persistent rumination, heightened emotional monitoring, and intensified emotional expression [15]. Studies also show that attachment insecurity is associated with poorer emotional adjustment through maladaptive emotion-regulation strategies and lower resilience [16]. Rather

than engaging in active, problem-focused coping, insecurely attached individuals frequently prioritize the reduction of emotional discomfort and the management of distress, often at the expense of effective problem resolution. Although these strategies may temporarily diminish tension, in the long term they restrict effective adaptation and increase vulnerability to chronic stress.

Influence on Adaptive Capacity, Mental Health and Societal Outcomes

Through the mediating mechanisms described above, insecure attachment exerts a substantial influence on the adaptive capacity of young people in adolescence and emerging adulthood. In the present model, adaptive capacity is understood as the individual's ability to maintain relatively stable psychological functioning under conditions of stress and change. Across empirical literature, insecure attachment is associated with reduced flexibility in coping with stressful situations [11], difficulties in mobilizing social support [17], and increased emotional reactivity [12]. Consequently, young individuals are more likely to experience heightened perceptions of threat, stronger feelings of helplessness, and diminished perceived control in response to normative developmental challenges [18].

Longitudinal and meta-analytic findings further indicate that attachment insecurity constitutes a significant risk factor for the development of internalizing psychopathology, including anxiety and depressive symptoms [19], [20]. These associations are commonly explained through sustained dysregulation of stress-response systems, which over time contributes to cumulative physiological and emotional strain. In line with Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome framework, chronic activation of stress systems results in depletion of adaptive reserves and compromised recovery capacity [21]. Contemporary neurobiological models similarly emphasize the role of allostatic load in linking repeated stress exposure to long-term mental health vulnerability [22].

Beyond individual-level adaptive challenges, these processes carry significant societal implications. Reduced adaptive capacity during adolescence is associated with impaired academic functioning, increased risk of school disengagement, and lower educational attainment, which in turn predict reduced occupational outcomes in adulthood [23]. At a population level, such trajectories contribute to increased demand on mental health services, elevated healthcare expenditure, and decreased workforce productivity.

Moreover, attachment-related deficits in trust and emotion regulation may extend into the social domain, affecting interpersonal functioning and broader patterns of social participation. Empirical and theoretical work suggests that chronic activation of attachment-related threat systems can undermine interpersonal trust and reduce engagement in cooperative and prosocial behaviors, thereby weakening social capital and community cohesion [24]. These effects are particularly relevant in contexts characterized by socioeconomic instability, where cumulative stress exposure may exacerbate existing inequalities.

Therefore, adaptive capacity should be conceptualized as a dynamic and context-dependent construct emerging from the interaction between relational experiences, ongoing social environments, and neurobiological regulation systems. This formulation underscores the importance of early preventive interventions and system-level policies aimed at strengthening caregiving environments, enhancing socio-emotional competencies in educational settings, and ensuring accessible mental health support. Such approaches may yield not only individual-level benefits but also broader societal gains in resilience, productivity, and social cohesion.

Dynamic and Non-deterministic Nature of the Model

It is essential to emphasize that the proposed model is probabilistic rather than deterministic in nature. The presence of certain contextual factors does not inevitably predetermine the development of insecure attachment or psychological difficulties. The social environment increases the likelihood of specific patterns of functioning, but their actual manifestation depends on numerous moderating factors.

These may include personality characteristics, traits, the presence of significant supportive figures inside and outside the family, participation in educational or professional communities, as well as access to psychological support and social resources. Even a single secure and supportive relationship may serve a corrective function and facilitate the development of more adaptive internal models.

The model also assumes that attachment and adaptive capacity constitute dynamic systems subject to change throughout the life span. New interpersonal experiences, positive social interactions and psychotherapeutic interventions may gradually transform insecure patterns of functioning. This renders the proposed framework valuable not only for theoretical explanation and empirical verification but also for the development of programs aimed at providing psychological and social support for young people living in small settlements.

Conclusion

The proposed integrative model conceptualizes the relationship between local social context, attachment, psychological mediators, and adaptive capacity as a coherent system of interconnected processes. The specific characteristics of small settlements — high social transparency, limited anonymity, and strong informal social control — may create conditions conducive to the formation and stabilization of insecure attachment patterns, particularly fearful attachment.

These attachment patterns influence emotional regulation, cognitive beliefs, social functioning, and coping strategies, which in turn determine levels of adaptive capacity and vulnerability to psychological difficulties.

The theoretical framework enables the formulation of specific research hypotheses concerning the relationships between local context, attachment, and mental health. In addition, it may serve as a foundation for the development of intervention programs aimed at strengthening emotional regulation, social support, and adaptive coping strategies among young people in small settlements.

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