

An overview of high school student's self-esteem in relation to parent and peer attachment

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Abstract

Attachment is the emotional bond between the infant and the primary caregiver that has a tremendous impact throughout their life. The current study aimed to explore the attachment of adolescents to parents and peers, their relationship and the impact on the development of self-esteem in adolescents aged between 16 and 18 years. The sample ($N = 561$) was randomly selected and data were collected across males ($N = 250$) and females ($N = 311$) from high schools. The method used in this study is the descriptive research design and data were collected using questionnaires about attachment and self-esteem. The results indicated that, overall, there was a correlation between parent attachment and peer attachment to self-esteem in adolescents. It turned out that attachment to parents shows a significant relationship with self-esteem regarding peer attachment. According to the research findings, we can conclude that a secure parent attachment contributes to a secure peer attachment and high self-esteem. The findings of this study can serve as an empirical basis for taking initiatives that focus on improving the psychosocial well-being of adolescents.

Keywords: Attachment; development; relationship; high school; self-esteem; students.

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1. Introduction

Attachment is an innate human need to create strong and lasting emotional bonds between a baby and parents or caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). The quality of this relationship accompanies child development throughout life, affecting cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. During adolescence, a critical period of development associated with numerous physical, cognitive and socio-emotional changes, a redefinition is observed in terms of quantity and quality relationship with parents and peers. An important aspect of personality during adolescent development is self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as an overall assessment of the individual, expressed in a positive or negative self-orientation, and is a component of the self-concept that Rosenberg (1965) defined as 'a set of individual thoughts and feelings towards self'. The development of self-esteem is determined by many internal and external factors, including how well we view our own performance and appearance and how satisfied we are with our relationships with other people (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). Studies reveal that relationship with parents and peers influence self-esteem. Adolescents show that a secure attachment to their parents results in positive relationships with peers, higher self-esteem and sustained academic achievement. Also, the support of close friends positively affects the adolescent's self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment (Buhrmester, 1990).

1.1. Conceptual or theoretical framework

The theory of attachment was first developed by Bowlby (1969) in his important work on 'Attachment and Loss', suggesting that every child has an innate need to establish secure attachment with his/her primary caregiver (usually the mother) and engage in attachment behaviour when his/her safety is threatened. Bowlby (1969) defined the attachment between the child and the caregiver as based on four basic characteristics as proximity maintenance: the desire to be close to the people to whom we are attached; safe heaven: returning to the attachment figure for comfort and security whenever he feels threatened or in danger; a secure base; and separation distress (Delvecchio, 2013). These four attributes are very evident in the relationship between a child and his caregiver. Secure basis is the attachment figure acts as a security base so that the baby can explore the surrounding environment; separation anxiety appears in the absence of the primary figure and the child becomes unhappy when he becomes separated from his caregiver.

Ainsworth is another important figure in elaborating Bowlby's attachment theory. She is well known for the strange situation assessment by observing a child's reaction to a caregiver and based on them analyses the relationship that exists between the baby and his mother (primary attachment figures). Ainsworth et al. (1978) through the Strange Situation identified different attachment behaviours by categorising them into three groups (A, B and C). Group A is the insecure avoidant children attachment. They do not seek contact with the attachment figure when distressed and after separation they avoid the joining with mom when she turns back. Majority of the babies were categorised as group B called secure attachment, where babies actively try to establish contact with their mothers. Babies with secure attachments are more cooperative and less angry when compared to the babies of the other two groups. They use the attachment figure as a safe base to explore the environment and seek the attachment figure in times of distress, fear or threat (Main & Cassidy, 1988). Group C is called insecure attachment, also known as resistant attachment. They try to establish contact with their mothers but resist once contact is established. They show signs of anxiety in the separation situation and ambivalent behaviour in the reunification seeking close contact with their mothers or resisting contact.

Ainsworth et al. (1978) expressed that an important element in the formation and development of the attachment is the quality of the communicative relationship between the caregiver and the child. The level of harmonisation of affection and communication between the caregiver and the child is crucial to the style of attachment.

1.2. Related research

Bowlby (1988) argues that the system of attachment behaviour is not limited to early childhood but is also observed throughout life to achieve protection, comfort and support. Earlier research on attachment was focused mainly on infancy and early childhood. In the beginning of the 1980s, studies on attachment began to expand in later developmental stages, such as adolescence, adulthood and old age, and at the same time expand the focus of attachment, such as relationships with peers, attachment between a couple etc. There is a limited but ever-growing literature studying adolescent attachment issues focusing on adolescent–parent and adolescent–peer issues, as well as the impact they have on other aspects of adolescent development and well-being, such as adaptation, self-esteem, self-concept etc. Blos (1967) called adolescence the ‘second phase of separation and individualisation’, while the first phase occurs at the end of the second year of life. This stage is just as important for the development of personality and ego as the first stage, where the primary caregivers continue to play an important role in this process. The period of adolescence is associated with transformations in both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the adolescent's relationship with parents and peers. Collins and Russell (1991) assess adolescence as a different period from childhood in terms of the frequency and content of interactions between child and parent.

The strange situation is known as the standard attachment measurement procedure for infants; adolescence and adulthood measuring instruments were developed years later. The development of these instruments led to a better understanding of how early attachment is developed, preserved and reflected in adolescent and adult relationships. Greenberg et al. (1983) developed the measuring instrument that focused on assessing adolescent attachment. The Adolescent Attachment Inventory is a self-report measure of the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of adolescents' relationships with their parents and peers. Greenberg et al. (1983) found that the perceived quality of adolescents' relationships with parents and peers is significantly related to their self-esteem and life satisfaction, and that in adolescents' well-being the quality of attachment to parents is stronger than the attachment with peers.

1.3. Purpose of the study

Studies on the topics of parent, peer attachment and self-esteem during adolescence are very few in the Albanian context. The aim of our study is to explore the levels of parent attachment, peer attachment and self-esteem of the adolescents in Shkoder County, their correlation and differences between genders.

The main objectives of the study are to explore the relationship between parent and peer attachment with self-esteem in adolescents:

1. Determine the adolescent's attachment style (secure/insecure) with parents.
2. Determine the adolescent's attachment style (secure/insecure) with peers.
3. Measure adolescent's self-esteem.

2. Method and materials

2.1. Research model

This is a descriptive and correlational study, designed as a quantitative study, which through quantitative analysis, conducted with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), aims to provide empirical data on parent–adolescent attachment, adolescent–peer attachment and self-esteem in adolescents aged 16–18 years in Shkoder County.

2.2. Participants

Adolescents aged 16–18 years of high schools in rural and urban areas of Shkoder County participated in this study. This age group belongs to the group of teenagers of the 10th and 11th grades of high school. The sample number taken in the study is 561, of which 311 are female and 250 are male. The stratified random sampling method was used to select the sample.

2.3. Data collection tools

Taking into consideration the study objectives and the design, two inventories were used for the data collection:

- The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) to assess adolescents' perceptions of the positive and negative affective/cognitive dimensions of relationships with parents and close friends, particularly how these figures serve as sources of psychological security (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Rehman & Butt, 2016). The assessed dimensions are degree of mutual trust, quality of communication, and extent of anger and alienation. The instrument is a self-report questionnaire with 5-point Likert scale responses (1 = Almost Never or Never True to 5 = Almost True or Always True). The original version of the IPPA that consists of 28 parents' items and 25 peer items, yielding two attachment scores, was used. The IPPA is scored by reverse scoring the negatively worded items and then summing the response values in each section. The alpha reliability of the IPPA is 0.875.
- Adolescent global self-esteem was assessed by using the Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, a 10-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2013). All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from 'strongly disagree' (0) to 'strongly agree' (3). Five negatively stated items are reversed scored. Individual scores are summed to determine an overall score where higher scores represent greater self-esteem. Internal consistency of the scale was 0.79.

2.4. Data collection process

The duration of the data collection lasted 4 months – December 2018–March 2019 – as the selected schools determined the appropriate time when the questionnaire would be distributed. The questionnaire was planned to be completed by the students themselves. To facilitate this process, there was a guide with information that aided the students through the completion.

2.5. Data analysis

The software SPSS version 26.0 was used for data analysis. A descriptive analysis of frequencies, distributions, arithmetic mean, median, standard deviation, minimums, maximums and percentages was carried out according to variable types. Statistical interpretation of the variables was carried out by making comparisons about the results in accordance with the purpose and objectives of this study and findings from analogues studies. Attention was paid to the reverse code constructs. After the presentation of the statistical processing of data and their results, the findings were discussed and, further, conclusions and recommendations were made.

3. Results

Table 1 shows a descriptive summary of the adolescent's sample according to gender, rural/urban area and municipalities. The sample consisted of 55.4% female adolescents and 44.6% male adolescents; 61% adolescents were from urban areas and 39% adolescents were from rural area; 69% were from Shkoder, 16.9% were from Malesi e Madhe and 14.1% were from Puke municipality.

Table 1. Number of participants based on gender, area and municipality

| (N = 561) | N | % |
|----------------|-----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 311 | 55.4 |
| Male | 250 | 44.6 |
| Area | | |
| Rural | 219 | 39 |
| Urban | 342 | 61 |
| Municipality | | |
| Shkoder | 387 | 69 |
| Malesi e Madhe | 95 | 16.9 |
| Puke | 79 | 14.1 |

Table 2. Descriptive statistics regarding attachment to parents

| Average point scale (1–5) | N | % |
|---------------------------|------------|--------------|
| 1.00 | 1 | 0.3 |
| 1.50 | 1 | 0.3 |
| 2.00 | 10 | 1.8 |
| 2.50 | 4 | 1 |
| 3.00 | 87 | 15.5 |
| 3.50 | 15 | 2.8 |
| 4.00 | 209 | 38.5 |
| 4.50 | 30 | 5.3 |
| 5.00 | 194 | 34.5 |
| Total | 561 | 100.0 |

According to the results of Table 2, adolescents have high levels of attachment to their parents. About 78% of the sample had an average of 4–5 points (high attachment with parents), 18% of the sample had an average of 3 points (medium attachment) and about 4% of the sample had an average below 3 points (low medium attachment). The results show that for most adolescents, the relationship with parents is characterised by a secure attachment.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics regarding attachment to parents

| Average point scale (1–5) | N | % |
|---------------------------|----|-----|
| 1.5 | 5 | 0.8 |
| 2 | 2 | 0.4 |
| 2.5 | 37 | 6.5 |

| | | |
|--------------|------------|--------------|
| 3.00 | 102 | 18.0 |
| 3.5 | 146 | 26.0 |
| 4.00 | 187 | 33.7 |
| 4.5 | 78 | 13.9 |
| 5.00 | 4 | 0.7 |
| Total | 561 | 100.0 |

Table 3 shows that adolescents had a moderately high attachment to their peers. 33.7% of the adolescent had an average of 4 points (high attachment), 14.6% had an average of 4.5–5 points (high attachment, maximum), 26% had an average of 3.5 points and 18% had an average of 3 points (medium attachment), while 7.7% adolescent averaged 1–2.5 points (low attachment).

Figure 1. Mean scores of parent attachment and peer attachment divided by gender, area and municipality. Source: Authors

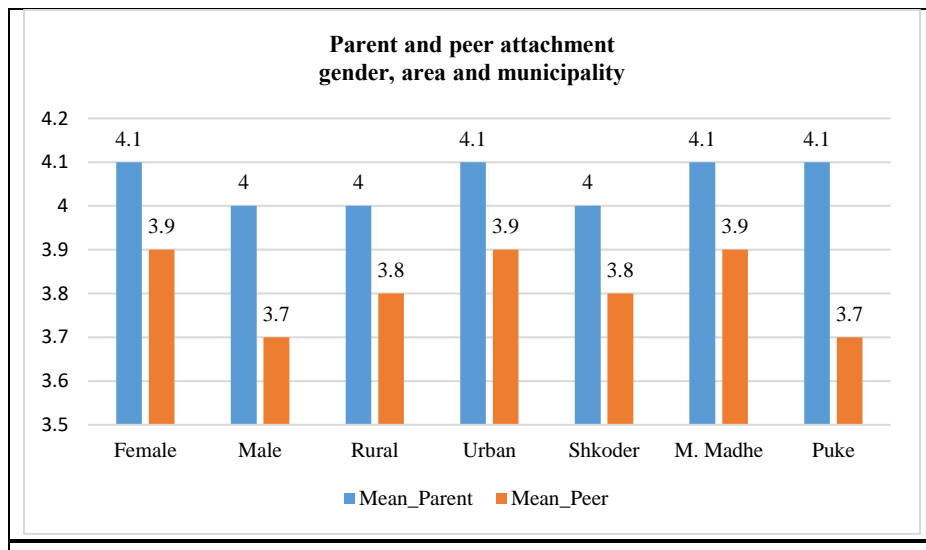


Figure 1 shows a comparison of the mean score (1–5 points) of parental attachment and peer attachment to gender, area and municipality. In general, these results indicate that adolescents reported positive relationship with parents and peers with a slight difference in the average between two variables: being more attached with parents than their peers. Female adolescents presented higher values of parent and peer attachment ($M = 4.1$ parent attachment; $M = 4$ peer attachment) than male adolescents ($M = 3.9$ parent attachment; $M = 3.7$ peer attachment). Adolescents of urban areas demonstrated higher attachment to parents and peers ($M = 4.1$ parent attachment; $M = 3.9$ peer attachment) than rural adolescents. Adolescents from the municipalities of Malesi e Madhe and Puka demonstrated the same or higher values of parent attachment ($M = 4.1$) than Shkoder adolescents ($M =$

4). Adolescents of Malesia e Madhe scored higher values regarding peer attachment ($M = 3.9$), followed by Shkoder ($M = 3.9$) and Puka ($M = 3.8$).

Table 4. Analysis of mean scores of parent attachment regarding gender and area variables

| | Levene's test for equality of variances | | t-test for equality of means | | | | | |
|--------|---|-------|------------------------------|-----|----------------|-----------------|---|-------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig (2-tailed) | Mean difference | 95% confidence interval of the difference | |
| | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Gender | 0.917 | 0.339 | 1.983 | 559 | 0.048 | 2.75 | 0.026 | 5.48 |
| Area | 4.480 | 0.035 | -0.872 | 559 | 0.383 | -1.24 | -4.02 | 1.55 |

Table 5. ANOVA of mean scores of parent attachment regarding the municipality variable

| ANOVA | df | F | Sig. |
|--------------|----|-------|-------|
| municipality | 2 | 0.790 | 0.454 |

Regarding the differences of demographic variables (gender, rural/urban and municipality) for the parent attachment, the data in Tables 4 and 5 show that, in terms of gender ($p = 0.048$), there was a statistically significant difference in the mean score of attachment with parents between female and male; meanwhile, in terms of rural/urban ($p = 0.383$) municipality ($p = 0.454$), there is no statistically significant difference.

Table 6. Analysis of the mean scores of peer attachment regarding the gender and area variables

| | Levene's test for equality of variances | | t-test for equality of means | | | | | |
|--------|---|-------|------------------------------|-----|-------|-----------------|---|-------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | p | Mean difference | 95% confidence interval of the difference | |
| | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| gender | 0.285 | 0.594 | 3.338 | 559 | 0.001 | 4.199 | 1.729 | 6.669 |
| area | 0.640 | 0.424 | -1.08 | 559 | 0.282 | -1.392 | -3.932 | 1.147 |

Table 7. ANOVA of mean scores of parent attachment regarding the municipality variable

| ANOVA | df | F | p |
|--------------|----|-------|-------|
| municipality | 2 | 1.160 | 0.314 |

Tables 6 and 7 show that, in terms of gender ($p = 0.001$), there is a statistically significant difference in the mean score of attachment with peers between female and male, while in terms of rural/urban ($p = 0.282$) or municipality ($p = 0.314$) there is no statistically significant difference.

Figure 2. Descriptive statistics regarding adolescents' self-esteem. Source: Authors

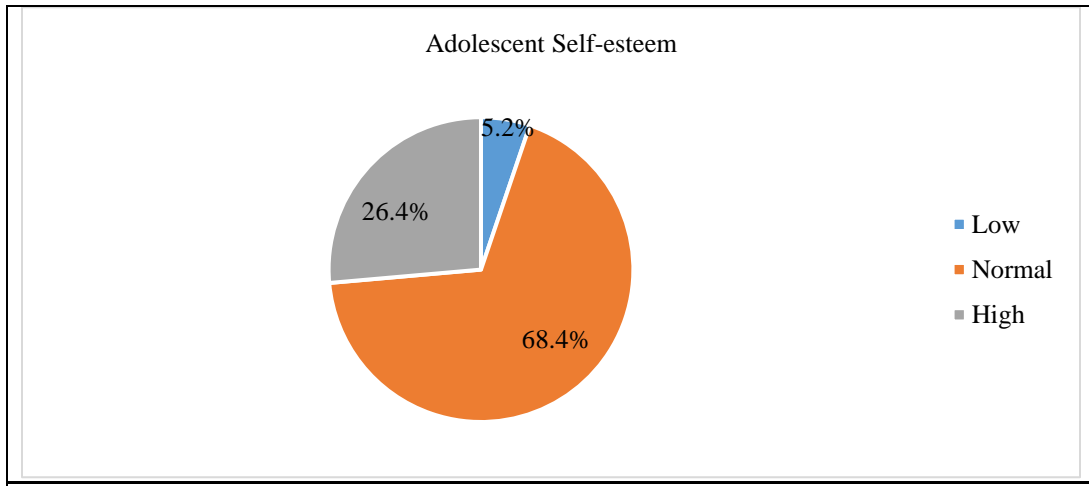


Figure 2 shows the descriptive data of adolescent's self-esteem. About 68.4% of the adolescents have normal self-esteem, 26.4% have high self-esteem and 5.2% have low self-esteem. Adolescents obtained 22.12 points in relation to their self-esteem (minimum value = 3 points; maximum value = 30 points).

Figure 3. Mean self-esteem scores divided by gender, area and municipality. Source: Authors

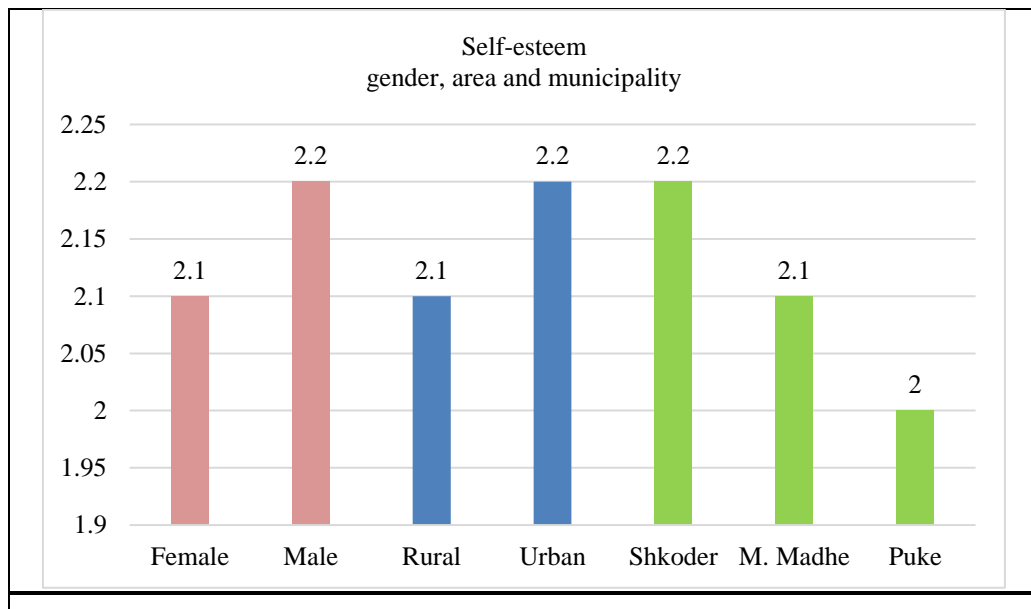


Figure 3 shows a comparison of the mean scores (0–3) of adolescents' self-esteems with regard to gender, area and municipality. Male adolescents presented higher values of self-esteem ($M = 2.2$) than female adolescents ($M = 2.1$); adolescents from urban areas had higher self-esteem values ($M = 2.2$) than rural area adolescents ($M = 2.1$). Considering the municipality, adolescents of Shkoder demonstrated higher self-esteem ($M = 2.2$), followed by Malesi e Madhe ($M = 2.1$) and Puka adolescents.

Table 8. Analysis of mean scores of self-esteems regarding gender and area variables

| | Levene's test for equality of variances | | t-test for equality of means | | | | | |
|--------|---|-------|------------------------------|-----|----------|--------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| | <i>F</i> | Sig. | <i>t</i> | df | <i>p</i> | Mean difference | 95% interval of the difference Lower | confidence of the difference |
| Gender | 1.612 | 0.205 | -1.832 | 559 | 0.068 | -0.78 | -1.62 | 0.056 |
| Area | 0.726 | 0.395 | -1.99 | 559 | 0.047 | -0.859 | -1.71 | -0.01 |

| Table 9. Analysis of mean scores of self-esteems regarding municipality variable ANOVA Municipality | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---|----------|----------|
| | 3.823 | 0.022 |

Regarding the differences between demographic variables (gender, area and municipality) and self-esteem showed that, in terms of gender ($p = 0.068$), there was no statistically significant difference in the average value of self-esteem between female and male, while in terms of rural/urban ($p = 0.047$) and municipality ($p = 0.022$), there was a statistically significant difference.

Table 10. Correlation among parent, peer attachment and self-esteem among adolescents ($N = 561$)

| | | Parent attachment | Peer attachment | Self- esteem |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Parent attachment | Pearson's correlation | 1 | 0.383(**) | 0.493(**) |
| | <i>p</i> | | 0.000 | 0.000 |
| | <i>N</i> | 561 | 561 | 561 |
| Peer attachment | Pearson correlation | 0.383(**) | 1 | 0.372(**) |
| | <i>p</i> | 0.000 | | 0.000 |

| | | N | 561 | 561 | 561 |
|-------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|-----|
| Self-esteem | Pearson | | | | 1 |
| | correlation | | 0.493(**) | 0.372(**) | |
| | <i>p</i> | | 0.000 | 0.000 | |
| | <i>N</i> | | 561 | 561 | 561 |

****Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

A Gender = female

Source: Authors

The results revealed that there was positive correlation between the parent attachment and peer attachment ($r_p = 0.383$), which was statistically very significant ($p < 0.001$). Also, there was a relatively strong positive correlation ($r_p = 0.493$) between parents' attachment and self-esteem, which was statistically very significant ($p < 0.001$). Data show that between peer attachment and self-esteem there was a moderate positive correlation ($r_p = 0.372$) and it was statistically very significant ($p < 0.001$).

4. Discussion

The results indicate that adolescents reported positive relationships with parents and peers with a slight difference in the average between two variables: being more attached with parents than their peers. Regarding the differences of demographic variables, female adolescents had higher and significant values of attachment with parents and peers compared to male adolescents. Meanwhile, in terms of rural/urban and municipality, there is no statistically significant difference. Findings on gender differences are consistent with previous studies reporting that females are more oriented towards 'bonding' and 'attachment' to others, while males are more oriented towards 'individualisation' and 'separation' from others. Significant gender differences from the use of the IPPA instrument were observed in a high school sample where it was stated that different from males, the formation and development of the female identity is closely related to attachment to others (Lapsley et al., 1990; Williams & Mc Gee, 1991). Taking into consideration the results of the study and the findings of previous research, we note that females in relationships with parents, peers and at school give great importance to the feelings of belonging and attachment compared to males. Women find it easier to establish confidential and intimate relationships compared to males. If we refer to the cross-sectoral study by Parker et al. (2005), we can find that friendship between girls is characterised by greater intimacy, empathy, interdependence and sharing of their problems and fears. Males, on the other hand, prefer to interact in larger friendship groups, focusing on socialising, competition, risky activities, attempts at direct control and avoiding intimacy and feelings.

Regarding the results of self-esteem, majority of the adolescents present normal self-esteem, followed by high and low self-esteem. Regarding the differences among demographic variables (gender, area and municipality), in terms of gender ($p = 0.068$), there was no statistically significant difference in the average value of self-esteem between females and males, while in terms of rural/urban ($p = 0.047$) and municipality ($p = 0.022$), there was a statistically significant difference. What we need to emphasise is that the self-esteem of both genders undergoes a decline during the early adolescence phase, regaining an increase and stability during late adolescence. This decline is twice as high for females than males. Studies have found that one-third of adolescents experience low self-esteem, especially in early

adolescence (Harter, 1990; Hirsch & DuBois, 1991). Gender studies have identified the fact that adolescent females, on average, have a lower sense of self-worth than adolescent males (Baumeister, 1993; Pipher, 1994). What is essential to know is that gender role identity influences an individual's self-esteem, self-concept and personal development.

The results revealed that there was positive correlation between the parent attachment and peer attachment ($r_p = 0.383$), which was statistically very significant ($p < 0.001$). Also, there was a relatively strong positive correlation ($r_p = 0.493$) between parents' attachment and self-esteem, which was statistically very significant ($p < 0.001$). Data show that between peer attachment and self-esteem there was a moderate positive correlation ($r_p = 0.372$) and statistically very significant ($p < 0.001$). Most of the adolescents showed high levels of attachment to parents and peers. The application of the Pearson correlation showed that there was a significant relationship between parent and peer attachment. We may confirm that the increasing values of the parent attachment correlate positively with the increasing values of peer attachment. These findings support the studies of Greenberg et al. (1983), which emphasise the continuing importance of parenting in adolescents. Consistent with previous studies, the results of the current study suggest that attachment to parents and peers are positively correlated to adolescent self-esteem. Studies have consistently shown that secure relationships with parents are associated with positive self-representations, which include high levels of global self-esteem and self-efficacy (Arbona & Power, 2003; Dekovic & Meeus, 1997; Laible et al., 2004; Mattanah et al., 2011; Noom et al., 1999). Positive experiences with peers, characterised by understanding, trust responsibility, affect a positive concept of self, while relationships with peers who are not responsible and acceptable lead to negative thoughts and a negative self-concept (Bowlby, 1988). Healthy social relationships are a source of self-esteem and self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to expand and deepen the knowledge on adolescents' attachment to parents and peers and the relationship of attachment on their self-esteem. The study showed that adolescents have a secure attachment to parents and peers, with a normal healthy self-esteem. Even though adolescents showed positive attachment relationships with both parents and peers, they have the highest attachment levels with parents. Attachment to parents and peers resulted in a strong positive link with self-esteem. The findings of the study show that attachment relationships with parents and peers are important in the successful development of the adolescent. Interactions with parental figures shape the adolescent's internal functioning patterns by influencing his cognitive, psychosocial and academic development. Safe attachment with parents reflects safe attachment to peers and high self-esteem.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, we offer some recommendations for parents, adolescents, teachers and psychologists' researchers, as well as for institutions and projects that their target group are adolescents.

6.1. Parents

- Parents need to know the importance of the continuous relationship with their children when they become adolescents. They should not view adolescent autonomy as a rejection of the relationship with their parents.
- Parents should be the first to accompany adolescents in exploring social norms, discussing values and negotiating their own boundary rules.
- They should pay attention to the emotional state of the adolescent by not justifying it as hormonal or physical development that characterises this age.

- Parents can rely on counselling or therapy for their difficulties with teens and other families.

6.2. Education policies

- Development and evaluation of parenting programmes that focus on attachment and effective parenting strategies for adolescents.
- Public health initiatives in collaboration with psychosocial staff and teacher staff in schools aimed at educating, recognising and understanding the importance of the parent–adolescent and adolescent–peer relationship.
- Provide written materials, videos and meetings with high schools, community centres and libraries on parent–adolescent–peer attachment.
- School psychologists should ensure a positive connection between parents, the school and the community.

6.3. Research initiatives

Attachment to parents provides only a partial picture of understanding relationships with peers and adolescent development. Future research on attachment and peer relationships can expand knowledge on this issue by considering other important factors to have comprehensive framework in predicting peer relationships.

For this we suggest the following:

- Develop self-report instruments and observational or interviewing methods for measuring adolescent attachment.
- Explore the transitions from attachment to parents to attachment to peers, from early adolescence to early adulthood.
- Research of the neighbourhood environment, schools, extracurricular activities, religious groups, volunteer groups etc. that play an important role in the development, psychosocial well-being of adolescents and in the formation of intimate adolescent relationships.
- Identify mediating and moderating factors of the relationship between adolescent attachment and functioning in adulthood (poverty, parental psychopathology, peer relationships and school success).

7. Limitations

In this research, only 16–18-year-old adolescents of Shkoder County participated, who attended one of the high schools of this county. Therefore, the study data cannot be generalised for all Albanian adolescents. It might also be important to identify and explore other mediating and moderating variables of the relationship between adolescent attachment and functioning in adulthood (poverty, parental psychopathology, peer relationships and school success). The role of teachers as attachment figures should also be explored and the role of the community, extracurricular activities, religious groups, volunteer groups etc., which play an important role in the development, psychosocial well-being of adolescents and in the formation of intimate adolescent relationships.

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