

EMOTIONAL NEGLECT IN CHILDHOOD – PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF ADAPTATION AND CONSEQUENCES

Lucia STAN¹

Rezumat

Este cunoscut faptul că violența își poate avea rădăcina în relațiile dintre părinte – copil; copilul învață un rol pe care ulterior îl replică ca adult în relațiile sale. Subiectul abordat în articol vizează o formă mai neobservată a violenței, respectiv neglijarea emoțională. Chiar și în lipsa asocierii cu alte forme de maltratare, neglijarea emoțională provoacă multă durere emoțională, iar consecințele ei sunt considerabile. Articolul explorează universul și trăirile intense ale copilului de vârstă mică, precum și modalitățile acestuia de adaptare în fața indisponibilității parentale. Urmărește ulterior modul în care aceste mecanisme se mențin în viața adultă și cum determină poziționarea persoanei pe unul dintre rolurile din triunghiul dramatic. Explic teoretic neglijarea emoțională din punctul de vedere al teoriilor atașamentului și ale traumei psihologice, căutând să ofer o perspectivă mai nuanțată asupra cauzelor violenței în familie, în special a celor ce țin de istoricul personal al unui individ și de transmiterea transgenerațională a violenței.

Cuvinte cheie: atașament, maltratare, traumă psihologică, indisponibilitate parentală.

Abstract

It is well known that violence can have its roots in parent-child relationships; the child learns a role and replicates it in adulthood in their relationships. The subject addressed in the article concerns a more unnoticed form of violence, namely emotional neglect. Even in the absence of association with other forms of abuse, emotional neglect causes a lot of emotional pain, and its consequences are considerable. The article explores the universe and intense experiences of young children, as well as their ways of adapting to parental unavailability. It subsequently examines how these mechanisms persist into adulthood and determines the individual's positioning in one of the roles in the dramatic triangle. The article theoretically explains emotional neglect from the perspective of attachment theories and psychological trauma, seeking to offer a more nuanced perspective of the causes of

¹ Principal social worker within the SPAS Initial Assessment, Emergency Intervention, and Coordination Service – General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Iași; graduate of the training in integrative psychotherapy provided by the Association of Integrative Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology Iași; e-mail: lucy_romila@yahoo.com; 0752028923

violence in the family, especially those related to an individual's personal history and the transgenerational transmission of violence.

Keywords: attachment, maltreatment, psychological trauma, parental unavailability

Résumé

Il est bien connu que la violence peut avoir ses racines dans les relations parent-enfant; l'enfant apprend un rôle qu'il reproduira plus tard en tant qu'adulte dans ses relations. Le sujet abordé dans l'article concerne une forme de violence plus inaperçue à savoir la négligence émotionnelle. Même en l'absence d'association avec d'autres formes de maltraitance, la négligence émotionnelle provoque beaucoup de douleur émotionnelle, et ses conséquences sont considérables. L'article explore l'univers et les expériences intenses du jeune enfant, ainsi que ses façons d'adaptation face à l'indisponibilité parentale. Il examine ensuite comment ces mécanismes se maintiennent dans la vie adulte et comment ils déterminent le positionnement de la personne dans l'un des rôles du triangle dramatique. Il explique théoriquement la négligence émotionnelle du point de vue des théories de l'attachement et du traumatisme psychologique, en cherchant à offrir une perspective plus nuancée sur les causes de la violence familiale, particulièrement celles liées à l'histoire personnelle d'un individu et à la transmission transgénérationnelle de la violence.

Mots-clés : attachement, maltraitance, traumatisme psychologique, indisponibilité parentale.

1. Introduction

Emotional neglect is a less addressed topic in the specialized literature, unlike other forms of neglect and abuse, perhaps, also, because it is more difficult to observe and quantify – it is complicated „to detect an absence, a void, a nothingness, when there should have been something: a word, an emotion, a reaction, an event, a fact, an appropriate, regulating, stimulating response” (Vasile, 2024, p. 79). A parent/ caregiver may be physically present and provide for some of the child's needs but may be emotionally absent in their interaction with them.

Emotional neglect speaks more about what didn't happen in childhood in interaction with parents/caregivers, talks about episodes when a child's emotions and needs couldn't be accepted, normalized, validated, contained, regulated with the support of parents/caregivers, and this has as much importance and power over a person as events from their personal history (Webb, 2023). Even in the absence of association with other forms of maltreatment, emotional neglect causes a lot of emotional pain, and its consequences are considerable.

Emotional neglect can be defined as a micro-trauma – „a micro-traumatic experience is, something that unfolds subtly, and thus its impact remains unexpressed, dissociated, or repressed. Because the person did not see the blow coming and did not fully register its impact, they did not defend themselves adequately. They also did not take any reparative or protective steps that could have eliminated the wound and its immediate consequences or prevented potential recurrences. As a result, the harm accumulates, leading to a distortion of the sense of well-being, effectiveness, or unity” (Crașnopol, 2019, p. 14).

Currently, at the national level, there are no specific statistics to measure the extent of the phenomenon - all forms of child neglect are reported as neglect

without distinguishing between different forms. However, considering that emotional neglect practically accompanies all forms of abuse and neglect, we can have an idea of its impact.

I mention that all parents/caregivers may occasionally emotionally neglect the child without causing harm, but emotional neglect becomes a problem if it is consistent/ repetitive in the parent-child relationship. „Cultural values and economic constraints force parents to impose certain restrictions on children and ignore legitimate needs, such as the need to express their feelings, to be fully accepted, or to explore freely in a safe environment. The mere fact that newborns survive and grow, becoming capable of perpetuating traditions and the species, does not mean that their fundamental needs have been met or that they have reached their potential in intellectual, emotional, or spiritual development” (Solter, 2020, p. 21).

In the situation where a parent/caregiver fails to be predictable, responsive, affectionate, available, and accessible to the child, meaning when emotional neglect occurs, between parent and child will create an insecure attachment relationship. Subsequently, the child's adaptation mechanisms to parental unavailability persist unconsciously into adulthood, forcing the individual into co-dependency, compelling them to position themselves in relationships with others in one of the roles of the dramatic triangle - victim, persecutor, rescuer.

2. Emotional neglect definition

Emotional neglect is a subjective experience of a person feeling ignored, unnoticed, unloved, unappreciated for their true worth, overlooked, taken for granted, unseen as a distinct individual, barely tolerated, unwanted, rejected, or abandoned (Stauffer, 2022).

The relationship with the parent is described as a lack (of presence, soothing, love, validation, attention, compassion, protection), indifference, or emotional coldness.

J. Young and J. Klosko (2017) define emotional neglect using the term „emotional deprivation”, which refers to experiencing a constant feeling of loneliness, emptiness, unfulfillment, and the sense of never being heard or understood as a person.

Classifying types of psychological trauma, Frantz Ruppert defines emotional neglect in three different ways: first, as attachment trauma – in which the individual does not have the chance for secure contact with those to whom they are attached (Ruppert, 2012), second, it is renamed symbiotic trauma – because it occurs in the relationship between mother and child, when the child is dependent on the mother (Ruppert, 2015), third, renaming it love trauma – marking the rupture in the relationship between mother and child in the first years of life, and, at the same time, marking the consequences of this type of trauma which manifest through the person's difficulties in loving and feeling loved by others (Ruppert, 2019).

“Psychic trauma represents the internal experience of splitting, inner rupture, disconnection from oneself, caused by threatening situational factors that

overwhelm personal capabilities of mastery or self-regulation, generating profound feelings of fear, helplessness, unprotected vulnerability, an experience that leads to long-term impairments in vitality, identity, and self-regulatory mechanisms” (Vasile, 2024, p.58). Thus, from the perspective of a baby, who is completely dependent on adults for care and thus survival, „parents who ignore or turn away from the child's calls for attention, connection, or help, abandon them in the face of a quantity of fear difficult to manage, and the child, ultimately, gives up and succumbs to feelings of helplessness and depressing hopelessness, akin to death” (Walker, 2022, p. 41).

The emotional impact of parental unavailability is demonstrated by E. Tronick through the *Still-Face Experiment* (Tronick, 2022). In this experiment, which lasts about two minutes, infants with secure attachments show emotional distress when mothers stop responding to them and only show an expressionless face. In this way, one can deduce how much pain prolonged exposure to such a relational dynamic can cause to a person.

Looking from another perspective, the emotional impact of emotional neglect can be connected to the process of grieving. Thus, when a bond of attachment is severed or lost, a grieving process is initiated, with several stages: anger, despair, and eventually detachment, so that, in the end, the person can accept and live with the pain of such a loss (Bowlby, 2016). In the case of emotional neglect, however, there arises a sense of ambiguous loss, namely the feeling associated with someone who is perceived to be physically present but psychologically absent. The pain of loss in this case is unresolved, hidden, and constant. „How do you mourn a relationship with a mother who was there, but wasn't?” (Boss and Kriesberg, 2023, p. 128).

3. Child's adaptation mechanisms and their impact on his/her adult life

The child is born completely dependent on the attention of the adults who care for him. This dependence is not only physical, through the need to be fed, to ensure a comfortable body temperature, to be diaper changed, to be cared for, etc., but also psychological/emotional. The child has an instinctive need for connection. T. Brazelton and S. Greenspan (2013) identify the need for permanent caregiving relationships as a primary necessity for babies. This type of relationship forms the foundation for the subsequent development of self-confidence, sense of self, empathy and compassion towards oneself and others, language, learning ability, and the way of building relationships with peers and adults.

In situations where a parent fails to mirror the child's feelings, to understand them, to respond to or ignores the child's emotional needs, and is not emotionally available for them, or lacks the capacity to repair the inevitable ruptures that occur in this relationship, then the child is forced to make efforts to adapt. G. Maté pointed out that „when the adult world demands, even involuntarily, that an infant or child suppress parts of their true self - their own desires, feelings, and preferences - the child cannot risk non-conformity so that the

essential attachment relationship is not compromised or threatened. He must develop within himself some mechanisms, forms of self-coercion, to preempt the anxiety that could arise if the caregiver is disappointed or disappears” (Maté, 2022, p. 438). More precisely, the child will be compelled to disconnect from their normal functioning and resort to mechanisms of protection/defense/adaptation in order to survive.

Precisely because they have not developed emotional self-regulation mechanisms and depend on how the parent/caregiver helps them, the newborn or young child is prone to traumatization.

An example of an adaptation mechanism that the child will use to attract the parent's attention is clinging – they will cry, scream, be noisy and agitated, disobedient, have tantrums, manifest through acts of violence towards themselves or others, refuse to comply, refuse to separate from the mother, etc., in other words, they will „make extraordinary efforts to win over their mother, to attract her, and thus to induce her to respond” (Stern, 2019, p. 72).

Such behavior can often be labeled as „problematic” by the parent because at the unconscious level „disorients him, aggresses the caregiver through the sense of helplessness mirrored” (Romano, 2023, p. 56). If the parent is not sufficiently available to respond to the child's need for closeness and patience enough to contain these states and calm them, then inevitably escalation will occur.

As long as the parent remains inconsistent in meeting the child's needs and as long as the child maintains hope that, at some point, the parent will respond, the attention-seeking behavior will persist. In the short term, clinging can offer a maternal type of protection and security for a young child because, in the absence of parental response, their resilience will lead them to seek fulfillment of their needs in other relationships (Stauffer, 2022). „Children notice that people respond to them warmly and instinctively seek emotionally mature adults with whom to relate in order to amplify their sense of security. Such an adult can be a neighbor, a distant relative, a teacher, etc. Others find this emotional support in relationships with friends or pets” (Gibson, 2021, p. 138). However, the child will grow up with the belief that immense efforts are necessary to have and maintain a relationship.

In adulthood, a child who retains this mechanism will live with permanent anxiety, anguish, exhaustion, the feeling of constant effort, the need for self-transcendence, with the feeling that they must run to keep up. Or they will exhibit „a hunger for love, which will lead them to remain in abusive or unsatisfactory relationships because the need is so great that the individual cannot give up their partner” (Cori, 2021, p. 125), they will not want to remain alone and will find it very difficult to become independent. They will also encounter great difficulty in managing a difficult situation on their own, develop an aversion to risk, and a strong resistance to change. Such an adult may be perceived as aggressive through their insistence, overwhelming their partner with demands, excessive requests for evidence of support, appreciation, attention, or love, expressing jealousy, undermining the partner's interests to gain their attention for themselves, or by manipulating to meet their own needs (Crossley, 2022; Kinnison, 2018).

Another adaptation mechanism is one in which the child „will be predisposed to strongly resonate with their caregiver, to tune in with them and reflect their negative emotions, sometimes taking on a part of their personality structure, in an effort to survive, to create a safer relationship and better emotional regulation for themselves” (Stauffer, 2022, p. 140). The baby can do this through „parental tuning”, where the attitudes and emotional states of the mother are unconsciously transferred to the child and understood by them without words (Stern, 2019). E. Fromm introduces the concept of symbiosis, seen as the process by which two distinct selves merge so that each loses its individuality and becomes completely dependent on the other (Fromm, 1998). Frantz Ruppert believes that the symbiotic process begins as early as the prenatal period, when the child reflects all the emotional dispositions of the mother, thus altering their psychic structure (Ruppert, 2015).

When this mechanism predominates, there is the risk that, being hyper-focused on the emotional life of the caregiver, the child may reach that point where they can no longer access their own feelings. This will leave the child with a terrible sense of inner emptiness. „Unless the child’s emotional suffering can be shared with sensitive adults and validated by them, the developmental narcissism necessary for the child makes them take everything personally” (Maté, 2022, p. 441), thus, the child will live with the impression that they are guilty, unworthy, defective.

As an adult, it can manifest in two different ways:

- Either they may appear as a very enmeshed person, with extremely weak boundaries and often with an uncertain identity; they will seek security by merging with the desires, needs, and demands of others; they will shrink and want to fade into the background, be timid and quiet, with low self-esteem, conformist, diligent, overly adaptable;
- Or they will be unconsciously driven by the belief that power and control can create safety and will learn to respond with anger, with a developed inner and/or outer critic, they will find scapegoats in the weaker ones, they will use intimidation and sarcasm – these manifestations can develop in children who have not been imposed healthy limits by parents or in children who have been allowed to imitate the aggressive parent (Cori, 2021; Stauffer, 2022; Walker, 2022).

F. Ruppert drew attention to the fact that the parental soul structure taken over by the child will be retained by them in the unconscious and will be reactivated later in similar circumstances to the initial traumatic situation. They will react either through self-harming behaviors (self-mutilation, suicide attempts) or through aggressive behaviors towards others (Ruppert, 2012).

Another example of an adaptation mechanism is when the child distances themselves from the caregiver, avoiding contact with them to maintain a more pleasant state. When there is no parent to show the child that their presence brings joy, no caregiver to take care of the child and ensure their safety, and no adult caregiver for the child to turn to when they need help and support, the child learns that they are on their own and must take care of themselves, quickly learning that

it is dangerous to express their desires and needs. (Stauffer, 2022) A child distances themselves from a parent when they are hurt and disappointed when it is too painful to ask for help and be ignored, and when they understand that reacting serves no purpose. Such behaviors usually appear in children who are usually very compliant, do not protest, adapt to what is imposed on them, are easygoing, and adapt to anyone and anywhere, without seeming to encounter difficulty. „Unfortunately, this can encourage their caregivers to continue to ignore them because they do not seem to need anything and always show the world a face that everything is fine” (Stauffer, 2022, p. 79).

As an adult, they will have major difficulties in initiating and maintaining a relationship, and if they do engage in one, they will impose a barrier between themselves and the other, not responding to the other's need for connection, thus perpetuating the aggression to which they themselves were subjected (Kinnison, 2018). Their manifestations fall into two registers, respectively:

- they will have the belief that people and danger are synonymous terms and will have difficulty asking for help, isolating themselves, manifesting social anxiety, developing pseudo-autonomy and independence, seeming to need nothing, being a good observer of others, but hard to read themselves; they will retreat into fantasy/daydreams/sleep/TV watching/online browsing and video games, into addictive behaviors, self-medication, to disconnect from pain; they will numb their feelings; they will feel that it is easier (and more familiar) to live without love than to approach their old wound;
- and/or they will be driven by the unconscious belief that perfection will bring them security and make them worthy of love; they will thus chase achievements, make compulsive plans, worry about what to do, be dependent on their own adrenaline, risky activities, work, stimulant substances, develop a tyrannical inner and/or outer critic, be overanalytical, detached from emotions (Cori, 2021; Stahl, 2023; Stauffer, 2022; Walker, 2022).

One last adaptation mechanism is when the child learns to indirectly satisfy some of their emotional needs by taking care of others, becoming a pseudo-savior. The child is thus „parentified” and takes care of the parent's needs - becoming their source of entertainment, confidant, substitute partner, coach, maid, or babysitter for younger siblings. In the worst-case scenario, the child may be sexually abused (Walker, 2022).

K. Stauffer explains that a child resorts to this mechanism because:

- “it causes a caregiver who is preoccupied or emotionally unavailable to become more affectionate if the child can fulfill some of their needs;
- it gives the child a little power and a bit of a sense of their own goodness, so they no longer feel insignificant and small if they can give something to someone else and, by doing so, make the other person feel good;
- the child can indirectly sense how happy the person they are caring for is, and although it is not the same as being happy themselves, it is close enough;

- it is a way to do something better than what was done to the child: knowing the pain of being ignored, they will not do the same thing to another human being;
- it distances the child from their own lack and inner emptiness; it can satisfy some social and attachment needs.” (Stauffer, 2022, pp. 49-50)

As an adult, they will display an exaggerated sensitivity to the needs of others, encounter difficulties in imposing healthy boundaries and saying „no”, be helpful and submissive, with low self-esteem, and build an identity of someone indispensable to others to find a purpose in life, demonstrate extreme self-sacrifice for others, suppress their anger, and be excessively concerned with social acceptance. (Stauffer, 2022; Walker, 2022)

The person will try to repair their negative self-perception developed in childhood by identifying partners who need to be saved. They will intuitively recognize chronic suffering or vulnerability. Initially, the person will appear kind and altruistic but later will become increasingly unhappy, disappointed, critical, and powerless because they believe they are not receiving the admiration, validation, and love from their partner. (Lamia and Krieger, 2021) At the same time, they may become aggressive, becoming suffocating in their relationship with others, keeping track of the things they do for others, and when they finally revolt, they will reproach others for their efforts or use them to manipulate (Stauffer, 2022; Crossley, 2022).

This mechanism seems to be adopted especially by women, through transgenerational transmission, from their mothers, who were themselves parentified (Stauffer, 2022, Miller, 2020).

In practice, there is no singular pattern of adaptation to adversity; each individual, depending on their own characteristics and lived experience, will use to a greater or lesser extent all the mechanisms described earlier. „Regardless of whether the outcome is beneficial and productive or unhealthy and destructive, the purpose of any adaptation mechanism is always integration and regulation” (McDonald, 2024, p. 165). However, the use of these mechanisms will tend to lead the individual into a co-dependent role. Furthermore, „these adaptations to adversity, once habitual, cannot discern between major threats, minor ones, and the fact that there is no threat” (Maté, 2022, p. 266). Moreover, they can constitute a personal relational style that remains stable throughout the lifetime.

In the unconscious dynamics that a person chooses in their daily interaction with others, codependency means adopting a role from the drama triangle. Whether one chooses the role of victim, persecutor, or rescuer, assuming this role actually illustrates the lack of personal responsibility in the context of conflict with others, maintaining a dysfunctional power balance in a relationship, and emotional exhaustion. For example, depending on the situation, the same person may go through all points of the triangle without realizing it. „The victim feels the need for a persecutor and someone to rescue them. The fact of needing someone to rescue them and at the same time being treated disrespectfully sometimes makes the victim become a persecutor, but then they feel guilty and

want to rescue the person they just persecuted” (Crossley, 2022, p. 38). Or, both victim and aggressor attitudes will blend into a person, determining a relational style that, although aiming for inner relaxation, actually generates more stress. This leads to a vicious cycle where conflict escalates, both within the individual and externally, involving others in an attempt to find support or relief outside. Then the person from the outside caught in the cycle, initially tasked with regulating, calming, and providing assistance, will gradually be transformed into a victim of the existing conflict and will be compelled to respond with similar attitudes and behaviors (Vasile, 2024).

Both the tendency towards victimization and the tendency towards aggression originate from an attempt to balance the psyche with traumatic experiences and from an inappropriate use of a person's information, abilities, and resources (Vasile, 2024).

The way out of the trap of the drama triangle is self-awareness and addressing the real issues of the individual. The older an unprocessed trauma is, the more time passes, the more the psychic processes are affected, and the greater the need for an increasingly larger consumption of energy to maintain the entire psychic system stable (Ruppert, 2012). Traumatic processing is the process through which an individual works with themselves, with the information of their pain, loss, and traumatic memories, until they can comfortably hold this information within and lead a normal life, experiencing satisfaction and an overall sense of well-being, reclaiming the ability to regulate and adapt to everyday life. (Vasile, 2024)

4. Conclusions

Emotional neglect causes as much harm as any other form of abuse or neglect and it is at the core of a person's suffering; it is the deepest and most denied/unseen/unexplored layer (Walker, 2022). Emotional neglect leads to the development of insecure attachment types and is associated with developmental stagnation concerning self-acceptance, a clear sense of identity, self-compassion, self-protection, the ability to relax, full expression capability, willpower, motivation, inner peace, self-care, self-esteem, relational difficulties, emotional rigidity, difficulties in processing emotions, maladaptive stress responses, a range of physical and mental problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies and/or self-harm, eating disorders, insomnia, various somatizations, and addictive behaviors (Cori, 2021; Stahl, 2023; Stauffer, 2022; Walker, 2022). Emotional neglect can cause feelings of inner emptiness, unrealistic self-assessment, self-directed anger, alexithymia - poor awareness and understanding of emotions, feelings of inadequacy, and difficulties in establishing healthy boundaries (Webb, 2022; Kriesberg, 2023; Gibson, 2021).

It is crucial for children to have responsive, interactive, and affectionate caregivers who can see them for who they are and care about their well-being. Equally significant is the parents' ability to repair the relationship with their children, to acknowledge mistakes, and to take responsibility for undesirable

behavior when it inevitably occurs. „Raising children in the spirit of nonviolence has become an essential element for our survival, for all of us. We must show children peaceful alternatives for resolving conflicts. We must also raise them so that they do not accumulate repressed feelings of fear or anger, as these emotions often underlie acts of violence. This means being very attentive to the factors that cause them suffering, helping them through periods of stress, and healing their traumas. *We can no longer afford to ignore children's feelings*” (Solter, 2020, p. 22).

Given the impact of emotional neglect on a child's adult life, it would be necessary to reassess the ways parents/caregivers interact with the child, as well as the interaction of various systems (medical, educational, legal, social protection) with the child, prioritizing the satisfaction of the child's emotional needs. The emphasis should be on raising awareness of this phenomenon among professionals and the general public, on sustained information, prevention, increasing the number of social services in the community, and making psychotherapy services more accessible.

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Biodata

Lucia STAN – Principal social worker at the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Iași, with responsibilities in evaluation and intervention in cases of abused, neglected, exploited children, victims of human trafficking, migration, and repatriations; trainer; in 2020 graduated the training in Integrative Psychotherapy provided by the Association of Integrative Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology Iași.