

# Immigrant and nonimmigrant youth adaptation in time of economic crisis: The role of the family

Athanasios Kyritsis, Xenia Antonopoulou, Markella Xifara, Frosso Motti-Stefanidi & Vasileios Pavlopoulos

Psychology Department, University of Athens

## Introduction

Nowadays, the economic crisis is considered a very stressful factor that influences a variety of families and, consequently, sets barriers to the positive adaptation of many adolescents, both directly (e.g. through unemployment of one or both parents) as well as indirectly, especially through affected parenting practices, more frequent interspousal conflicts and the disturbance of the parent-child relationship (Conger et al., 1990; Barrera et al., 2002). Adolescents from families that face financial struggles may also have difficulties at school (e.g. lower grades), as well as on a psychological and emotional level; this finding is verified by multiple studies in many different countries worldwide (World Bank Report, 2012). However, not all adolescents seem to be equally affected by economic hardship, with some having notably high psychological and school adaptation. Literature shows that parenting practices such as a strong bond with the parents, encouragement for autonomy and self-expression of the adolescent and low psychological control are beneficial for adolescent adaptation, especially under harsh circumstances (Allen et al., 1994; Goldberg, 2000; Lopez & Brennan, 2000).

## Research Questions

Our study had three main research questions:

1. Are there differences, on grounds of ethnic origin, in three parenting domains (parental bonding, parental psychological control and autonomy granting) of the mother-adolescent relationship?
2. In the mother-adolescent relationship context, do bonding, psychological control and autonomy granting self-reports predict school and psychological adaptation?
3. When economic hardship is present, can the aforementioned factors have a protective role for adolescent school and psychological adaptation?

## Methods

This study is part of the AStRA (Athena Studies of Resilient Adaptation) research group's project. The sample consisted of 1049 immigrant and nonimmigrant 7<sup>th</sup> graders (mean age 12.6 years), in Attica, Greece. Of these students, 564 were boys and 485 were girls, while 383 originated from Greece, 315 from Albania, 116 from Pontus (ex-USSR), 139 from other countries, mainly Asian and African ones, and 96 from mixed marriages. In order to measure parenting practices, pupils were given the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979) (12 items,  $\alpha=.88$ ), the Parental Psychological Control-Youth Self Report (Barber, 1996) (8 items,  $\alpha=.81$ ) and the Autonomy Granting Scale - Parent Behavior Measure (Peterson, Rollins & Thomas, 1985) (10 items,  $\alpha=.80$ ). The adolescents' psychological adaptation was measured through Rosenberg's Self-esteem Questionnaire (1965) (10 items,  $\alpha=.79$ ), and their school adaptation through their grades in 5 major subjects from their first term. Lastly, family economic difficulties were assessed by the Economical Hardship Questionnaire (Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989) (10 items,  $\alpha=.77$ ).

## Results

In order to answer the first research question, we run an analysis of variance, and found that **Greek** students reported significantly **stronger emotional bonding with their mother** and **lower parental psychological control** than students originating from "other" countries (see Figure 1). Regarding autonomy granting, no significant differences were found.

For the second research question, we created a hierarchical regression model. In the first three steps we controlled for gender, immigration status and economic hardship and in the fourth step we added each parenting variable of interest. Beta-values of parenting predictors that occurred in the fourth step are presented in Table 1.

Finally, for the third research question, we added a fifth step to the existing hierarchical regression model, in which we examined the interaction between parenting dimensions, economic hardship and adaptation outcomes. It was found that, in conditions of **low economic hardship**, adolescents with **strong emotional bonding** with their mother and **low maternal psychological control** reported **high self-esteem**. Although this difference was less visible in situations of high economic hardship, **strong emotional bonding and low psychological control** still predicted self-esteem positively (see Figure 2). As for GPA, no significant interaction was found.

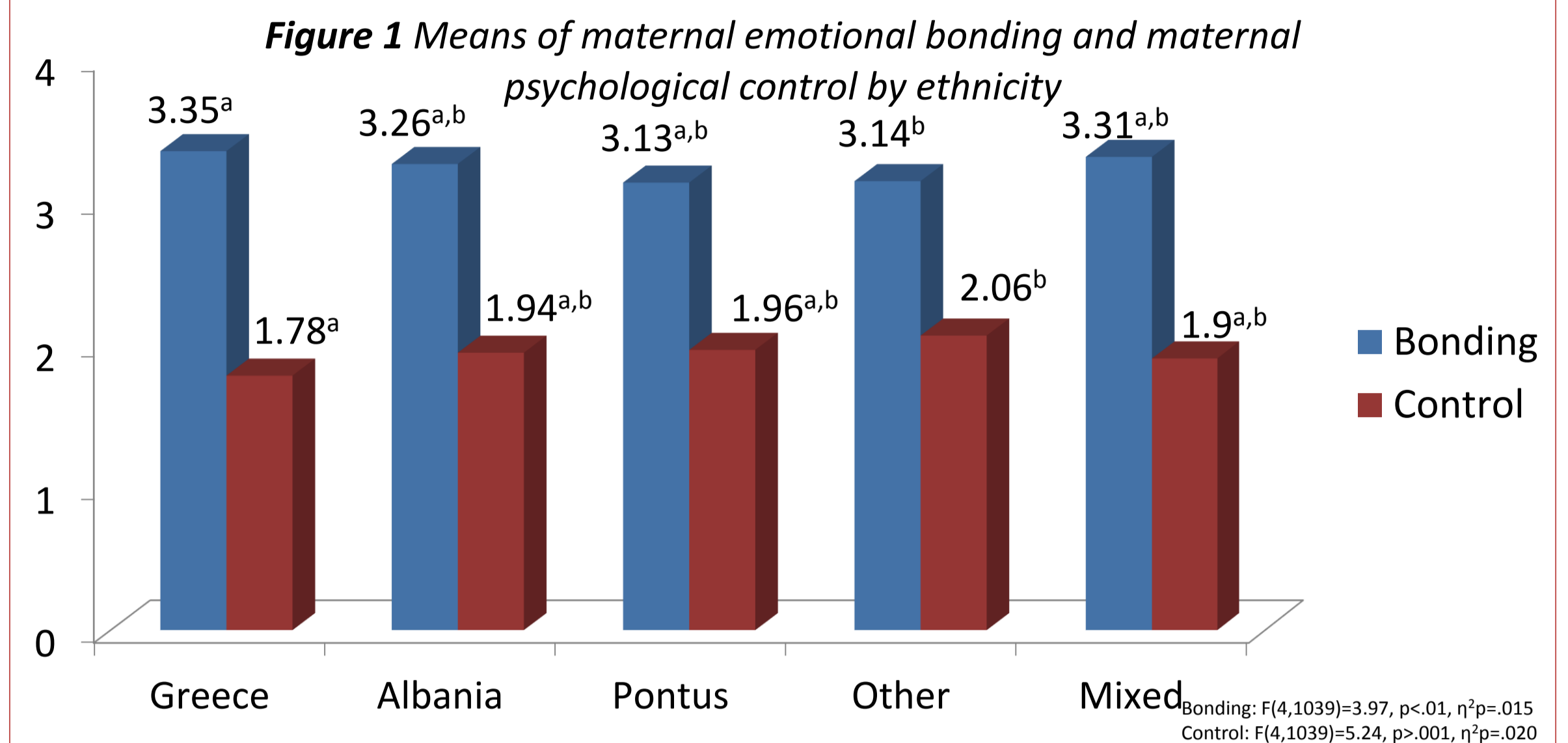
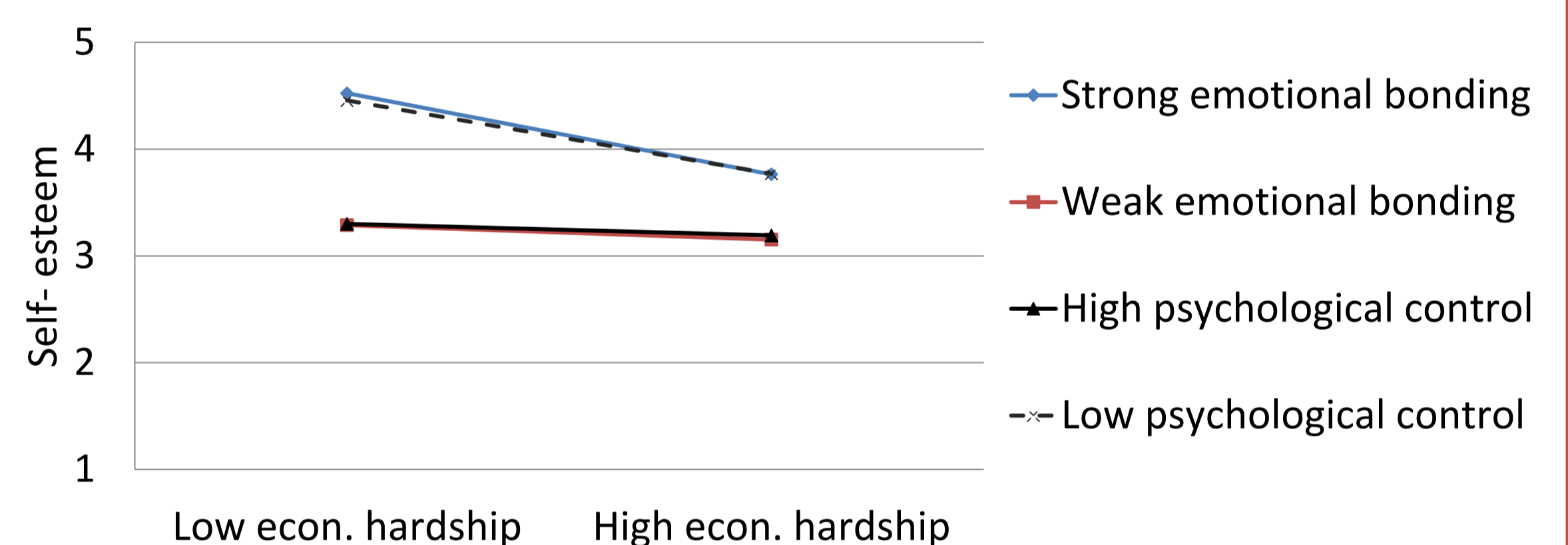


Table 1 Main effects of predictive variables on students' GPA and self-esteem

| Predictors (4 <sup>th</sup> step) | GPA<br><i>beta</i> | Self-esteem<br><i>beta</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Maternal emotional bonding        | .211***            | .403***                    |
| Maternal autonomy granting        | .091**             | .348***                    |
| Maternal psychological control    | -.128***           | -.393***                   |

Bonding:  $GPA: F(4, 1044)=80.345, R^2=.235, p=.000$  - Self-esteem:  $F(4, 1044)=66.27, R^2=.202, p=.000$   
Autonomy:  $GPA: F(4, 1044)=65.356, R^2=.200, p=.001$  - Self-esteem:  $F(4, 1044)=51.036, R^2=.164, p=.000$  \* $p<.05$ , \*\* $p<.01$ , \*\*\* $p<.001$   
Control:  $GPA: F(4, 1044)=68.477, R^2=.208, p=.000$  - Self-esteem:  $F(4, 1044)=61.521, R^2=.191, p=.000$

Figure 2 Interaction of maternal emotional bonding and maternal psychological control with economic hardship on self esteem prediction



## Discussion

The finding that maternal emotional bonding and autonomy granting predict psychological and school adaptation positively, whereas maternal psychological control predicts adaptation negatively, independently of gender, ethnicity or economic hardship, is in accordance with the existing literature (Peterson et al., 1983; Garber et al., 1997; Mboya, 1995; Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Taylor, 2000). This finding underlines the significance of a **positive mother-child relationship** for child adaptation and, in conjunction with the finding that Greek (nonimmigrant) students report higher levels of these predictors, we can expect higher Greek (nonimmigrant) student psychological and school adaptation. Another interesting finding is that **weak maternal emotional bonding** and **high maternal psychological control** predict generally **lower self-esteem** for adolescents, almost independently of economic hardship. The interaction becomes more visible when emotional bonding is high and psychological control is low. Finally, it is interesting that these two predictive variables seem **inversely proportional**, as they seem to predict almost the same self-esteem values, but inversely.

## Conclusions

1. Improvement of **positive parent-adolescent relationship** is important, especially for immigrants, as this is expected to result in better **adaptation** outcomes, both at psychological and school performance level.
2. When adolescents are faced with **economic hardship**, good **parenting practices** (low parental control, strong emotional bonding) predict **higher self-esteem** and therefore have a **protective** function.



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