

Personality, Peers' Aggression, Acceptance and Rejection in a Group of Brazilian Children

Silva MCR¹, Fiamenghi-Jr GA², Oliveira RC³, Souza CB³, Silva MFX³

¹Department of Psychology, UNISAL, Brazil

²Department of Psychology, FAAT, Brazil

³Department of Psychology, FIEL, Brazil

*Corresponding author

Dr Geraldo A. Fiamenghi-Jr

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Abstract: This study aimed to analyze peers' aggression, rejection and acceptance, as perceived by children and teachers. 39 children, 7 to 9 years old, and 3 teachers from a government school in São Paulo State, Brazil, were assessed, using the ETPC (Personality Traits Scale for Children), the HTP (House-Tree-Person) test, a questionnaire for children's perception of aggression, rejection and acceptance, and another for teachers' perceptions of those same behaviors. Results showed that 48.7% of children presented verbal abuse and 56.4% suffered physical abuse in the family. Teachers reported aggressive behavior in 41% of participants. The sample's most relevant personality trait assessed by ETPC was extroversion with impulsivity, aggression and sensation seeking. HTP results showed features of insecurity, anxiety and tension. It was concluded that the higher the social acceptance, the lower the declared school aggression, with peers' acceptance as a positive factor.

Keywords: personality, interpersonal relationships, family, aggression, school.

INTRODUCTION

Personality is an intriguing concept, as it entails different definitions and studies. Bergeret [1] has defined personality as a stable, though reversible arrangement, emphasizing the existence of metapsychological elements, such as defense mechanisms, object relation, and ego libidinal evolution. Psychoanalysis states that family has a fundamental role in personality development.

Freud [2] believes personality to be comprised by a vital energy, developed in different stages, in the ways it structures itself with unconscious desires, and in the ways it deals with internal conflicts. Freud's vision is of a psyche organized between internal conflicts and instances, in a battle between superego and id due to sexuality and aggression demands toward expression and release. Those conflicts engender anxiety, indicating the need for the ego to use defense mechanisms, mental processes that defend the ego against the danger of invasion by impulses and unconscious contents. Freud [2] explains that those conflicts are due to the ways the psyche organizes personal experiences, dealing with each developmental stage drives, establishing the personality comprehension and character's traits. Thus, the concept of psychosexual stages of development as constitutive of personality, highlighting that its establishment happens via introjection of family relationships. If the child gets fixated in any of the psychosexual stages (named as oral, anal, phallic – Oedipus Complex, genital), that may determine how the adult psyche functioning is

defined, as well as the consequential psychopathologies, as each stage has peculiar personality features stemmed by the relations between child and parents. Freud [3,4] explained defense mechanisms as attempts of the ego to solve situations, but they can cause problems when excessively or rigidly employed.

Concerning children's needs, Winnicott [5,6] has focused his studies in the family and its relationship with personality development. He understood child as a product of constant and permanent integration with the environment. However, the meaning of environment for Winnicott is the one that enables and allows the child to develop his/her potential. For him, as personality progresses, the child experiences basic processes of integration, personalization and adaptation to reality in a gradual fashion [6]. Thus, when flaws happen during those basic processes, discomfort can be produced in the child and uneasiness appears. Those feelings can outpour in other development stages, as a revival of a fault happened during the first years [7].

Relationships among family members are initially conducted by the mother, as she presents the external world to the infant. Family is the first milieu allowing the expression of emotions that are determinant for every human being. Bonds children establish with emotionally significant adults might direct the foundations of psychological organization and help to integrate libidinal, narcissistic, erogenous and aggressive drives ([8,9]. In this sense, Fiamenghi-Jr and Messa [10] state that the family group is prominent in child's behavior, as well as in the personality development and may support the child's insertion in community and society.

Another place for significant social bonds in childhood is the school. According to Pires [11] there is no possibility for a complete and healthy human development without the building and conservation of interpersonal relations. Although in the first years of childhood relationships with peers are not as relevant as the ones with carers, they will improve and flourish through development, especially in teenage years. In that stage, having friends is connected to feelings of safety, self-worth, and wellbeing [7,12].

Socialization processes may be divided into mental processes of socialization, involving norms, language learning, social conventions, and knowledge acquired through school. Another socialization process is the affective one, involving empathy, attachment, friendship and behavioral processes of socialization which allow the attainment of desired social behaviors [13]. Children, who are well adjusted to school, showing positive peer relations, are more prone to socialization and learning. For some authors, peer relations are even more important than those with the teacher [11]. Although school might promote self-esteem, as well as social abilities with peers and groups, it may also offer risk factors for a healthy development, when negative relations with peers and teachers, absence of balance and affection are the norm [14]. Therefore, perception of support by teachers is not enough in itself and must be combined to perception of support by family and peers. In fact, parents and peers support are more relevant at the end of childhood and beginning of adolescence [11].

Psychoanalysis' conceptions of aggression try to include biopsychosocial aspects, as well as experienced psychological ones, taking in account the influence of constitutional psychological and environmental traits, explaining normal and pathological facets of aggression. Aggression is part of the person's constitution, directed to life or death drives. Winnicott [7,12] states that the environment is important to allow the expression and transformation of child aggression. When there is not a stable and safe bond with the mother, the child cannot reach a

sufficient mature internal organization to integrate his/her own destructivity, needing the environmental contingency to restrain his/her impulses. Another possibility to explain the permanence of an aggressive functioning in the child is an antisocial tendency [12]. Aggressive behavior in school could lead to peer rejection, causing large problems concerning child's emotional and social development [15]. High levels of aggression and low levels of sociability are related to peer rejection [16]. Peers' perception may reflect the degree of a child's social inclusion or exclusion [17]. Due to aggressive behaviors, teacher report that they spend more time dealing with conflicts inside the classroom than with teaching [18].

Situational variables such as frustration, stressing environmental elements, and conflict, act as triggers for aggressive behaviors. Personal variables such as personality traits form the potential for individual aggression leading the behavior [19]. Winnicott [12] points school as a favorable environment to aggression, when the child has not found the necessary contingency to his/her impulses at home. Aggression, then, is a request, a demand directed towards the environment for a return to the point in which there was a developmental failure, for that interruption to carry on [20].

Thus, the purposes of this research were to understand aggressive behaviors in children, concerning constitutional and relational aspects, and their impact in interpersonal school relations. Specifically, it aimed to understand the connection between peer acceptance and rejection with aggressive behaviors and possible family conflicts, as well as to assess child and teachers' perception of aggressive behaviors in school and their impact in peer relations.

METHOD

Participants

Sample was established by 39 7-to-9-year-old male and female primary school children (41%, N=16, female), 36% (N=14) attending 3rd year, and 64.1% (N=25) attending 4th year, from a government school in southeast Brazil. Children were chosen by the director from three different classrooms, due to complaints by most teachers. Also 3 teachers who dealt daily with the children were part of this study. Parents and teachers signed a document, authorizing their participation in the research.

Instruments

Questionnaires and 2 tests were used to assess participants' personalities.

- Questionnaire to assess peers' acceptance and rejection and potential family conflicts (Self-report). It was developed by the researchers with 10

objective questions (always, sometimes or never; yes; no; always, maybe, or never) and 1 descriptive question.

- Questionnaire to assess teachers’ perceptions of children’s aggression behaviors. It was developed by the researchers, with 4 objective questions and 11 descriptive questions.
- HTP (House, Tree and Person Test) [21]. As a projective technique, HTP stimulates the projection of personality elements and conflict areas, allowing them to be identified and used as tools for an effective communication.
- Personality Traits Scale for Children (ETPC) [22]. The Personality Traits Scale for Children (ETPC) was developed and standardized aiming to assess personality traits in 5- to 10-year-old children. It has 30 items (answer yes, or no) taking 10 minutes to be completed. It assesses four factors, Extroversion (trait responsible by impulsivity); Neuroticism (reactivity of Autonomous Nervous System); Psychoticism (no feelings, or

preoccupations towards others); Sociability (antisocial behaviors).

Procedures

After parents signed the Term of Consent allowing their children to participate, they completed the questionnaire to assess peers’ acceptance and rejection and potential family conflicts, the HTP, and the ETPC. Teachers also signed the Term of Consent and answered to the questionnaire to assess children’s aggression. Research was approved by the Ethics Committee (number 03640012.2.0000.5424).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SPSS® Package was used to run descriptive statistics tests for each instrument, as well as a correlational analysis between HTP and ETPC.

Firstly, we present results for the questionnaire to assess peers’ acceptance and rejection, as well as the child’s perception about family relations (Table 1).

Table-1: Results of the Questionnaire to assess peers’ acceptance and rejection and potential family conflicts

Questions	Never		Sometimes		Always		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you like your friend to play or do any activities in school with you?	2	5.1	10	25.6	27	69.2	39	100.0
Do your friends like you to be near them playing or doing activities?	8	20.5	12	30.8	19	48.7	39	100.0
Do your parents yell at you at home?	18	46.2	19	48.7	2	5.1	39	100.0
Do your parents beat you at home?	16	41.0	22	56.4	1	2.6	39	100.0
Do your siblings yell at you at home?	19	48.7	12	30.8	8	20.5	39	100.0
Do your siblings beat you at home?	24	61.5	13	33.3	2	5.1	39	100.0
Do your friends out of school yell at you?	27	69.2	11	28.2	1	2.6	39	100.0
Do your friends out of school beat you?	32	82.1	5	12.8	2	5.1	39	100.0

Concerning peers’ acceptance and rejection, 69.2% (N=27) reported liking to play with school friends, and 48.7% reported appreciating the friends to be near them doing activities, or playing. Participants also reported no verbal aggression from out of school friends (62.9%, N=27), and 82.1 (N=32) affirmed never to suffer physical aggression. Analyzing participants’ needs to make friends, 89.7% (N=35) reported having many friends and 82.1% (N=32) said they would like to have more friends. Results lead to presuppose that having friends is connected to feelings of safety, self-esteem and well-being, as participants are in a stage of development when social relations are at their peak. The quality of adjustment to peer group will reflect on personal development; this will, in turn, allow for good interpersonal relationships, as the wish of having more friends, indicating feelings of acceptance [11].

Regarding family relationships, 48.7% (N=19) answered that sometimes parents yell at them, and

56.4% (N=22) said that sometimes parents beat them up, suggesting that physical and verbal aggression is part of those children’s family life. Aggression on the part of the family tend to generate unpleasant feelings, as family is the place for the child to deposit his/her anxiety [10]. The sort of relations children have with the family is a predictor of the kind of personality the child will develop [5,6], as personality traits are formed through the organization and the internalization of experiences [2]. When considering their siblings, 48.7% (N=19) report that siblings never yell at them and 61.5% (N=24) said they have never been physically attacked by their siblings. A good relationship with siblings may offer support to psychological organization, integrating child’s drives [8].

Teachers were assessed in their perception of aggressive behaviors of their pupils as well. They answered that 41.6% (N=16) of the participants present aggressive behaviors, being 31.2% (N=12) physical

aggression, such as punching, kicking, and pushing peers, 7.8% (N=3) throw objects, and 23.4% (N=9) verbal aggression (yelling and swearing). Only one pupil directs his verbal aggression to the teacher. Although aggression is part of internal constitution, it might be questioned whether those children show low tolerance to frustration, or the environment is felt as hostile, creating gaps in ego formation [9, 12].

While teachers said that 23.1% (N=9) of the pupils complain to them about aggressive attitudes from their peers, 66.7% (N=26) never complain, which in some sense, shows that acceptance is more observed than rejection. Peer acceptance is a positive factor to decrease school aggression [16].

About their attitudes towards aggression, teachers reported that they react to 41.1% (N=16) of their pupils, being 33.3% (N=13) some sort of verbal reprehension, 2.6% (N=1) sending the pupil to director and communicating the parents; 2.6% (N=1) asking for help from the school staff, and 2.6% (N=1) talking to the pupil and sending him to director.

Teachers informed that 33.3% (N=13) will apologize, but 7.7% (N=3) maintain their attitude, as if

nothing had happened. In fact, teachers said that in 69.2% (N= 27) of the cases, other school staff never notice aggression. On the other hand, teachers do not offer explanations for most children they consider aggressive (71.8%, N= 28). They think that in 18.2% (N=7) of the cases, children are experiencing family problems, such as parents' divorce, lack of attachment, or parents' fights.

In general, according to both questionnaires, the number of aggressive pupils is small, compared to the total number of pupils, which seem not to hinder school activities. However, it seems that teachers misperceive personality traits with aggression, as peers do not reject them. It is also noticeable that most of aggression/personality problems are credited to family difficulties. As family is fundamental to personality development, conflicts originated within the family may be observed as lack of love, impelling the child to create defense mechanisms to deal with them [3,5,6].

Thus, ETPC test was used for a deeper search into those conflicts and their consequences in school. According to the test manual, only scores from 75% quartile and below 25% quartile in personality traits were analyzed and are shown in tables 2 to 5.

Table-2: Percentage distribution of extroversion trait

Classification	Number of Participants	%
Less than 25%	1	2,6
25%	0	0
Less than 50%	2	5,3
50%	0	0
Less than 75%	1	2,6
75%	1	2,6
More than 75%	33	86,8
Total	38	100,0

Results show 89.4% (N=34) classified from quartile 75% in extroversion trait, indicating that children are described as impulsive, carefree, aggressive, spontaneous, easily inflammable, and not always trustworthy, although tending to be sociable, assertive, alive and cheerful [22]. A classification under quartile 25% was found in one child only, indicating

that he/she tends to be more introspective, withdrawn, shy, and having fewer friends. Such personality traits denote more stable functional tendencies, having been introjected in meaningful parental relations. Therefore, conflicts will be expressed in future aggressive and impulsive behaviors, as means of trying to make sense of childhood experiences [4,12].

Table-3: Percentage distribution of psychoticism trait

Classification	Number of Participants	%
Less than 25%	28	73,7
25%	2	5,3
Less than 50%	1	2,6
50%	3	7,9
Less than 75%	2	5,3
75%	2	5,3
More than 75%	0	0
Total	38	100,0

Concerning psychoticism trait, 73.7% (N= 28) of the sample presented results under quartile 25%, indicating that those children tend to be more emotionally sensitive, more worried with others, and more conventional [22]. Those results reflect positive

personality functioning, as sensitivity may promote school adjustment and remove risk factors [14] and worrying with others show empathy and a tendency to solve social problems [11].

Table-4: Percentage distribution of neuroticism trait

Classification	Number of Participants	%
Less than 25%	11	28,9
25%	2	5,3
Less than 50%	4	10,5
50%	8	21,1
Less than 75%	1	2,6
75%	5	13,2
More than 75%	7	18,4
Total	38	100,0

Neuroticism trait was presented in 31.6% (N=12) of the sample, indicating that children may be anxious, depressive, guilty, low self-esteem, melancholic, sad, fearful, nervous, emotionally instable [22]. Results are related to emotional instability, connected to development and a healthy environment.

For the ego to be structured and integrated, it is essential for the child the presence of a good-enough mother, offering the fundamentals of mental health; in that absence, ego is going to be fragile [6], which will influence on peer relations as well.

Table-5: Percentage distribution of sociability trait

Classification	Number of Participants	%
Less than 25%	6	15,8
25%	3	7,9
Less than 50%	1	2,6
50%	6	15,8
Less than 75%	7	18,4
75%	6	15,8
More than 75%	9	23,7
Total	38	100,0

Regarding sociability trait, 39.5% (N=15) of the sample was within the quartile 75%, showing that those children can be described as adequate and well-adjusted to social rules [22]. School is, together with the family, the most important social milieu for socialization and the ability to adequately keep and adjust to social relations are vital to child development [14,15,19]. Sisto [16] observed that the higher the social acceptance, the lower the school aggression.

Therefore, HTP test was also used to investigate conflicts in personality areas that could be connected to the other instruments. Criteria to analyze HTP were based on 50% or more of the sample presenting 3 or more points in each concept of the protocol, obtained by adding percentages from 3 occurrences in each category.

Table-6: Frequency of variable insecurity in HTP

Distribution	Number of Participants	%
1	9	23,7
2	6	15,8
3	9	23,7
4	6	15,8
5	3	7,9
6	3	7,9
7	2	5,3
Total	38	100,0

Table 6 allows to observe that 60.6% (N=23) of the sample scored 3 to 7 responses related to insecurity, showing that they may tend to feel

inadequate, seeking satisfaction in reality, as opposed to phantasy [21]. Insecurity appears when the child feels rejected, not integrated, and avoiding socialization [22].

Table-7: Frequency of variable anxiety in HTP

Distribution	Number of Participants	%
0	7	18,4
1	4	10,5
2	4	10,5
3	4	10,5
4	6	15,8
5	5	13,2
6	5	13,2
7	1	2,6
9	1	2,6
13	1	2,6
Total	38	100,0

Table 7 shows that 60.5% (N=23) of the sample had 3 to 13 answers related to anxiety, allowing to speculate on problems in ego development. Excessive or absent maternal function directed to the

child may interfere in superego formation, and anxiety appears as a defense against environment threats and its excessive use is risky to development [4,9].

Table-8: Frequency of variable withdrawal in HTP

Distribution	Number of Participants	%
0	1	2,6
1	5	13,2
2	5	13,2
3	10	26,3
4	4	10,5
5	2	5,3
6	4	10,5
7	3	7,9
8	2	5,3
9	1	2,6
1	1	2,6
Total	38	100,0

Table 8 shows that 71% (N=18) of the sample had 3 to 10 answers related to withdrawal aspect, that might indicate a more stable and strictly controlled behavior, as well as a tendency to postpone the

satisfaction of their needs [21]. Excessive withdrawal is a defense against a perceived invasive behavior, and as a result, the child tends to live inside his/her own world, where persecution is neutralized [7].

Table-9: Frequency of variable tension in HTP

Distribution	Number of Participants	%
0	1	2,6
1	7	18,4
2	8	21,1
3	14	36,8
4	5	13,2
5	2	5,3
6	1	2,6
Total	38	100,0

Table 9 shows that 57.9% (N= 22) of the sample had 3 to 6 answers in tension aspect. Relationships based in confidence will decrease persecutory fears; when there is no confidence; ego integration is hindered, due to external and internal pressures. The result is tension within the functioning of psyche, generating difficult interpersonal relations, as

tension prevents the externalization of feelings, and a tendency to repress affects [2].

To analyze the relation between personality traits assessed by ETPC and HTP, a Pearson correlation coefficient was used. Table 10 shows HTP variables that demonstrated a significant association with any of ETPC factors.

Table-10: Correlational analysis between ETPC and HTP

HTP	Statistic	ETPC			
		Extroversion	Psychoticism	Neuroticism	Sociability
Dependence	r	-0.299	0.505**	-0.159	-0.207
	p	0.068	0.001	0.340	0.213
	N	38	38	38	38
Strictness	r	-0.423**	0.147	0.040	-0.173
	p	0.008	0.378	0.810	0.298
	N	38	38	38	38
Tension	r	-0.042	0.502**	0.027	-0.223
	p	0.802	0.001	0.874	0.178
	N	38	38	38	38
Immaturity	r	-0.421**	0.293	-0.241	-0.230
	p	0.008	0.074	0.146	0.164
	N	38	38	38	38

*significant ($p < 0,05$); ** highly significant ($p < -0,01$).

A statistically significant negative moderate correlation was found between HTP variables Strictness and Immaturity and ETPC's Extroversion, indicating that the more strictness and immaturity, the less extroversion. According to Winnicott [7], mother's lacking ability to *revêrie* establishes with her child a mechanic experience, without space for the new, for discovery and spontaneity. The child will develop a false self in response to environmental expectancies, reacting obsessively and submissively to a strict and demanding superego. This process will hinder ego integration and a strict and immature personality will face difficulties in interpersonal relations, and the child will be withdrawn, shy, introverted, having few friends, opposed to a spontaneous and open to interpersonal relations one.

A significant positive moderate correlation was found between HTP variables Dependency and Tension and ETPC's Psychoticism, indicating that the presence of dependency and tension tend to increase psychoticism. Although child's dependence on the environment in the first years is fundamental to emotional development, when the child is not able to leave mother's dependence, being fixated on that relationship, he/she is unable to develop confidence, leading to troubles in further stages of development [12]. The building of a trustful relation helps to decrease persecutory fears, which when intense, obstruct ego integration and interpersonal relations, as

the person will employ attack and defense mechanisms. In fact, children presenting psychoticism are described as harsh, solitary, antisocial, hostile and insensitive [22].

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to understand children's aggressive behavior related to constitutional and psychological aspects and their impact in school relations, as well as to assess children and teachers' perceptions of those behaviors, using two questionnaires (one for children and one for teachers) and two tests (one objective and one projective). The children's questionnaire, intended to evaluate peers' acceptance and rejection showed that most of the sample presented an adequate interpersonal adjustment with peers at school. However, results pointed at physical and verbal aggression in the children's relations with parents or carers, leading to the reflection on the importance of family relations and their interference in personality development and interpersonal relations. The teachers' questionnaire indicated their perception of children's aggressive behaviors and different ways of expression.

Nevertheless, it is important not only to identify the presence of aggressive behaviors in school, but to understand which personality traits and features are more evident. Results of ETPC showed that the sample presented extroversion as main trait, with

aspects understood as impulsivity, aggression, lack of preoccupation, and not being reliable. Another trait presented by the sample is sociability, expressed as assertion, activation, and animation. In fact, those traits symbolize experiences that were introjected in family relations, which the child will reproduce in other interpersonal relations. HTP indicated anxiety, withdrawal, tension, and insecurity, leading to the consideration that aggression is a way of defending from own frailties.

Lack of control of a fragile ego might be misinterpreted by teachers, when the child is projecting his/her personal experiences in school, due to the absence of family support that does not offer necessary containment. Teachers do not have a correct perception because they lack support and information, hence the importance of psychological intervention in school, aiming to advising staff in behavioral and emotional handling of children, due to school being a significant environment in identity development.

Another important field of research and intervention is the family of aggressive children, as a locus for development and interpersonal relations.

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