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PROMOTING SOCIALLY ADJUSTED TRAJECTORIES IN LATE CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE¹

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ABSTRACT

In this research we aim to analyze the development of socialization in order to identify some variables that can be considered as protective factors for socially adjusted behaviours, namely variables related to, individual, family and sociodemographic aspects. For this purpose, three self-report measures were administered to 182 children and adolescents attending school in Portugal from 6th to 9th grade. Results indicate that some individual factors (e.g. age and gender), socioeconomic status, as well as family relations should be considered when designing intervention programs that intend to promote prosocial behaviours and prevent antisocial behaviours. This study points out to some factors that may allow us to anticipate vulnerabilities and strengths in late children's and adolescents' developmental trajectories. It is our belief that this investigation has the potential to enable more profound discussions around the role of family atmosphere, individual characteristics and living conditions in the development of social behaviours throughout childhood and adolescence.

Keywords: development, socialization, behaviour, children, adolescents, prevention

**PROMOTING SOCIALLY ADJUSTED TRAJECTORIES IN LATE CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE****EM BUSCA DA PROMOÇÃO DE TRAJETÓRIAS SOCIALMENTE AJUSTADAS NA INFÂNCIA E ADOLESCÊNCIA****RESUMO**

Na presente investigação procurámos analisar o desenvolvimento da socialização de forma a identificar algumas variáveis passíveis de constituírem factores protectores para comportamentos socialmente ajustados. Em particular, variáveis relativas a aspectos individuais, familiares e socio-demográficos. Para este propósito, foram auscultados 182 crianças e adolescentes a frequentar o ensino em Portugal entre o 6º e o 9º ano de escolaridade, aos quais foram administrados três questionários de auto-resposta. Os resultados obtidos apontam para a importância de considerar alguns factores individuais (por exemplo, idade e género), assim como o nível socioeconómico e as relações familiares para a construção de programas de intervenção vocacionados para a promoção de comportamentos pró-sociais e na prevenção de comportamentos anti-sociais. O estudo apresentado indica-nos, de facto, alguns factores que poderão permitir antecipar vulnerabilidades e vantagens nas trajetórias desenvolvimentais de crianças e adolescentes. Acreditamos que esta investigação poderá contribuir para aprofundar a discussão em torno do papel da atmosfera familiar, das características individuais e das condições de vida no desenvolvimento dos comportamentos sociais durante a infância e adolescência.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento, socialização, comportamento, crianças, adolescentes, prevenção

INTRODUCTION

When discussing social behaviours, most authors agree that numerous different factors may contribute for adjusted or misadjusted trajectories. At the present time “an underlying assumption of developmental models is that different causal factors will lead to different developmental trajectories and in some cases to different trajectories for different types of antisocial behaviours” (Lacourse et. al, 2002, 910). From a thorough analysis, these factors appear to be related to three major groups, that is, individual characteristics, social environment, and family characteristics (Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998; Farrington, 2004; Fonseca, 2004; Rutter, 2004; Born, 2005; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2008).

Regarding the role of family factors, both family structure and family relations have been considered to influence social behaviours. In fact, the impact of structural aspects such as the household composition, family size and order of birth on children and adolescents’ social conduct has been hypothesized (e.g. Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998; Farrington, 2004; Born, 2005; Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006). In addition, the effect of family relations and parental rearing practices has been widely acknowledged in literature (e.g. Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998; Farrington, 2004).

Environment also plays a remarkable role in social behaviours, in particular, aspects such as socioeconomic conditions, peer relations and school environment (e.g., Bender & Lösel, 2011; Farrington, & Ttofi, 2011), which are believed to influence individuals’ conduct in social situations.

Finally, individual characteristics such as intelligence, personality, age or gender (among others), also contribute for the development of adjusted social behaviours. Particularly interesting in this regard is the role of gender, since the frequency in behaviour problems is much higher in males than it is in females. Indeed, gender appears to be one of the most robust predictors of antisocial behaviour and one of the most consensual topics in this matter (Moffitt, & Caspi, 2001; Lahey, &



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Waldman, 2004; Tremblay, 2010). Likewise, age seems to have an equally strong influence on social behaviours, since, not only there seems to be an increase in antisocial behaviours during adolescence, but also developmental theories stress that the impact of potential protective and risk factors in social behaviours may vary according to the individuals' age (Lahey, & Waldman, 2004; Tremblay, 2010). In other words, the importance of the different contexts seem to vary with age and one elucidative example of such is the relative impact of family and peers in social behaviours. In fact, if in early childhood family provides the privileged context where children can learn and develop socially adjusted conducts, as children grow up and enter school and other contexts outside the family, there is a tendency to perceive a higher value in their peers opinions and judgements.

Among others, socialization frequently appears as an important concept in order to understand adjusted and misadjusted trajectories including antisocial behaviour. In their studies for the original version of the Socialization Battery (BAS-3), Silva, Martorell and Clemente (1985) found that antisocial individuals tend to present a pattern of results in the mentioned measure that reflects deficits in some socialization aspects (the term socialization is conceptualized as the incorporation of specific ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are adopted by a social group and make the individual identifiable as part of that group). In fact, the authors found, in a sample of institutionalized delinquents, a tendency to show higher scores in social isolation, while presenting lower scores in consideration towards others and in self-control in social relations.

Such results concur with many other authors' conclusions regarding antisocial behaviours and trajectories. In fact, the mentioned study refers to delinquents as having a tendency for social isolation (passive or active withdrawal from others). Likewise, some authors claim that social bonds indeed influence the adjustment of social trajectories, that is, weak social bonds constitute a vulnerability for engaging in deviant social behaviours (Sampson, & Laub, 2005; DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008). Consideration towards others (related to social sensitivity, care for others, selflessness, and emotional empathy) is thought to be low in delinquents, which is in agreement with several authors, that concluded that emotional empathy and care for others are important predictors of prosocial/antisocial behaviours (Selman, 1975; Schultz, Barr, & Selman, 2001; Schultz, Selman, & La Russo, 2004; Lahey, & Waldman, 2004). Self-control in social relations, a dimension also typically low in antisocial individuals, describes a continuum that goes from respect and acceptance of social rules that foster mutual respect, to a pattern of aggressive or imposing behaviours, stubbornness and indiscipline. In literature regarding antisocial behaviours, control is indeed a very important predictor of deviancy and a central aspect in some theories of antisocial behaviour. (Gottfredson, & Hirschi, 1990 *in* Fonseca, & Simões, 2002; Sampson, & Laub, 2005; DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008).

From the existing body of literature, it becomes clear that there are several individual, social, and family variables that may explain antisocial behaviours and trajectories, and that there has been an effort to identify antisocial individuals' social behaviours and attitudes. In light of such knowledge, it may be useful to understand if the factors that have been identified to put individuals at risk for antisocial behaviours, have a role, as well, in the development of socialization in children and adolescents', providing, therefore, some valuable information for preventive interventions, especially at a primary level.

METHOD

Objectives

Having in mind the existing theoretical framework on antisocial behaviours and its determinants, we aimed at verifying if, among children and adolescents, some family, environmental and individual characteristics believed to influence social behaviours would, in fact, result into different social-



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ization patterns that could allow us to point out some clues for prevention and intervention. Therefore, the following hypotheses were put to test:

1. Good family relations are protective factors for socialization;
2. Family structure is related to socialization:
 - 2.1. Living in a traditional household is related to a positive socialization;
 - 2.2. The number of siblings influences socialization;
 - 2.3. The order of birth is related to socialization;
3. High socioeconomic status is a protective factor for a positive socialization;
4. Individual characteristics are related to socialization:
 - 4.1. Age influences socialization;
 - 4.2. Differences in gender are related to differences in socialization.

Subjects

Data for this study was collected in a public school from the city of Coimbra (Portugal). Our sample was occasional and composed of 182 students attending school between the 6th and the 9th grade, aged from 10 to 19 years old (mean=13). Table 1 displays the sample's distribution according to socioeconomic status, school year and family structure.

Table 1. Sample's distribution (frequencies and percentages)

		Frequency	Percentage
Socioeconomic status	Low	53	29.1
	Medium	80	44.0
	High	49	26.9
	TOTAL	182	100.0
Age	10	1	0.5
	11	35	19.2
	12	32	17.6
	13	25	13.7
	14	61	33.5
	15	15	8.2
	16	11	6.0
	17	1	0.5
	19	1	0.5
	TOTAL	182	100.0
School year	6th grade	46	25.3
	7th grade	33	18.1
	8th grade	22	12.1
	9th grade	81	44.5
	TOTAL	182	100.0
Family Structure	Traditional	139	76.4
	Non-traditional	43	23.6
	[One-parent families (32), Re-marriage families (9), Others (2)]		
	TOTAL	182	100.0

Instruments and procedure

After obtaining all the authorizations, data was collectively collected during class time. Three measures were used for that purpose and data were anonymous and confidential:

- *Socio-demographic questionnaire* (Morgado, & Vale Dias, 2010), with 13 questions related to the individuals' characteristics (gender, age, school year), family structure (number of siblings, household structure, etc.), area of residence (urban/rural, geographic region), and socioeconomic status (based on the parents' career and qualifications);



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- *Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire* (Bastin, & Delrez, 1976; Portuguese version from Vaz Serra, 1987), a self-report measure that provides information about how adolescents and adults perceive their relations with their parents. It has 63 items that can be answered with "True", "I do not know" and "Not true". Its results offer four types of data: a generic score about family atmosphere (divided into two factors: Sharing thoughts and feelings and Consistency/Inconsistency), a score concerning the relation with the father (divided into seven factors: Tolerance/Domination, Acceptance/Rejection, Appreciative/Degrading, Autonomy/Overprotection, Non conflicting/Conflicting, Trust/Mistrust and Educator/Non Educator), another concerning the relation with the mother (also divided into seven factors: Tolerance/Domination, Acceptance/Rejection, Appreciative/Degrading, Consistency/Inconsistency, Trust/Mistrust, Non conflicting/Conflicting and Educator/Non Educator), and a global score that consists on the sum of all the above mentioned scores;

- *Socialization Battery* (Silva, Martorell, & Clemente, 1985; Portuguese version by Ferreira, & Rocha, 2004), a self-report instrument that measures dimensions related to social behaviour in children and adolescents, particularly to social relations with peers. It has 75 items that can be answered with "Yes" or "No". Its results provide information about five social dimensions and one of "Sincerity": "Consideration towards others", "Self-control in social relations", "Social isolation", "Social anxiety/Shyness", and "Leadership".

Tests for comparison of means were used to analyze differences in socialization variables due to household composition, order of birth, socioeconomic status, and gender. In order to study the influence the number of siblings, parent-child relations and age in socialization variables, we performed a regression analysis.

RESULTS

Family relations and socialization

Regarding the first hypothesis, that family relations would be protective factors for a positive socialization, results generally suggest that this is the case. Tables 2 and 3 show that, as expected, parent-child relations significantly predicted "Consideration towards others" ($R^2=.111$; $p=.007$), "Self-control in social relations" ($R^2=.181$; $p=.009$), and "Social Isolation" ($R^2=.121$; $p=.030$).

Table 2. Regression analysis: Family relations as predictors of social behaviours

Dependent V.	Independent V.	R	R ²	F	P	t	P
Consideration towards others	General Questions					-.104	.917
	Father	.334	.111	7.442	.000	2.733	.007
	Mother					1.234	.219
Self-control in social relations	General Questions					1.283	.201
	Father	.426	.181	13.122	.000	1.927	.056
	Mother					2.631	.009
Social isolation	General Questions					-.2189	.030
	Father	.348	.121	8.181	.000	-1.129	.260
	Mother					-1.542	.125
Social anxiety/Shyness	General Questions					-1.611	.109
	Father	.227	.052	3.230	.024	-1.557	.121
	Mother					.362	.718
Leadership	General Questions					-.236	.813
	Father	.148	.022	1.326	.267	1.705	.090
	Mother					-.211	.833



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Table 3. Regression analysis: Family relations as predictors of social behaviours (Specific factors)

Dependent V.	Independent V.	R	R ²	F	P	T	P
Consideration towards others	Tolerance/Domination					.618	.537
	Acceptance/Rejection					4.941	.000
	Appreciative/Degrading					.673	.502
	Autonomy/Overprotection	.444	.197	6.104	.000	1.828	.069
	Non conflicting/Conflicting					-1.424	.156
	Trust/Mistrust					-2.282	.024
Self-control in social relations	Educator/Non educator					-1.159	.284
	Tolerance/Domination					4.189	.000
	Acceptance/Rejection					2.525	.012
	Appreciative/Degrading					-1.287	.200
	Consistency/Inconsistency	.479	.229	7.389	.000	3.045	.003
	Trust/Mistrust					-1.618	.108
Social isolation	Non conflicting/Conflicting					.421	.675
	Educator/Non educator					1.362	.175
	Sharing thoughts and feelings	.292	.085	8.314	.000	-2.828	.005
	Consistency/Inconsistency					-2.533	.012

Father-child relations, and, in particular, “acceptance/rejection” ($R^2=.197$; $p=.000$), and “trust/mistrust” ($R^2=.197$; $p=.024$), were significant predictors of “Consideration towards others”. Regarding mother-child relations, predictors for “Self-control in social relations” were “tolerance/domination” ($R^2=.229$; $p=.000$), “acceptance/rejection” ($R^2=.229$; $p=.012$), and “consistency/inconsistency” ($R^2=.229$; $p=.003$). Finally, “Social isolation” was predicted by “sharing thoughts and feelings” ($R^2=.085$; $p=.005$), and “consistency/inconsistency” ($R^2=.085$; $p=.012$), both of the factors that describe the general family atmosphere.

Family structure and socialization

The second hypothesis, on the role of family structure, included several questions. The first one, regarding household composition, was refuted since no significant differences were found in socialization dimensions according to the household in which individuals lived (Table 4). The only exception was for “Social isolation” ($t=-1.992$; $p=.048$), a dimension that was higher in individuals from non-traditional households than in individuals living in a traditional household.

Table 4. Independent Samples T Test: Household/Social Behaviours

Household	Socialization	Average	Std.Deviation	Average difference	t	P
Traditional	Consideration towards others	12.482	1.803	-.761	-.225	.822
Non-Traditional		12.558	2.323			
Traditional	Self-control in social relations	10.453	2.480	.639	1.485	.139
Non-Traditional		9.814	2.423			
Traditional	Social isolation	1.820	2.181	-.785	-1.992	.048
Non-Traditional		2.605	2.489			
Traditional	Social Anxiety/Shyness	4.540	2.652	-.460	-1.009	.314
Non-Traditional		5.000	2.488			
Traditional	Leadership	6.662	2.709	-.199	-.457	.670
Non-Traditional		6.861	2.522			

Regarding the influence of the number of siblings in socialization, no significant results were found. The same occurred when differences in socialization according to the order of birth were tested. Hence, in general, the second hypothesis was not confirmed, since none of the tests performed showed significant results.

Socioeconomic status and socialization

The third hypothesis, that high socioeconomic status would be a protective factor for positive socialization, was confirmed. Although no significant differences were found in the comparison



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between individuals with low and medium socioeconomic status nor in the comparison between medium and high socioeconomic status, significant differences were found between individuals with low and with high socioeconomic status. In fact, from the results presented in table 5, it can be noticed that there are significant differences in “Self-control in social relations” ($t=-2.626$; $p=.010$), in “Social isolation” ($t=2.133$; $p=.035$), and in “Social anxiety/shyness” ($t=2.105$; $p=.038$).

Table 5. Independent Samples T Test: SES/Social Behaviours

Socioeconomic status	Socialization	Average	Std.Deviation	Average difference	T	P
Low	Consideration towards others	12.755	1.628	.102	.325	.746
High		12.653	1.521			
Low	Self-control in social relations	9.755	2.571	-1.204	-2.626	.010
High		10.959	1.999			
Low	Social isolation	2.321	2.055	.852	2.133	.035
High		1.469	1.970			
Low	Social Anxiety/Shyness	5.170	2.440	1.007	2.105	.038
High		4.163	2.384			
Low	Leadership	6.736	2.466	.267	.491	.625
High		6.469	3.001			

Individual characteristics and socialization

Our fourth assumption regarding individual characteristics was widely confirmed. In fact, the test of the hypothesis concerning age (Table 6) revealed a significant influence of such variable on “Consideration towards others” ($R^2=.046$; $p=.004$), “Self-control in social relations” ($R^2=.029$; $p=.022$), and “Leadership” ($R^2=.041$; $p=.006$).

Table 6. Regression analysis: Age as predictor of social behaviours

Dependent V.	Independent V.	R	R ²	F	T	P
Consideration towards others	Age	.214	.046	8.597	-2.932	.004
Self-control in social relations		.170	.029	5.349	-2.313	.022
Social isolation		.065	.004	.753	.868	.387
Social anxiety/Shyness		.006	.000	.007	-.086	.931
Leadership		.201	.041	7.598	-2.756	.006

Table 7. Independent Samples T Test: Gender/Social Behaviours

Gender	Socialization	Average	Std.Deviation	Average difference	t	P
Male	Consideration towards others	11.750	2.312	-1.393	-5.184	.000
Female		13.143	1.218			
Male	Self-control in social relations	9.810	2.529	-.915	-2.523	.012
Female		10.725	2.358			
Male	Social isolation	2.321	2.653	.587	1.744	.083
Female		1.735	1.886			
Male	Social Anxiety/Shyness	3.893	2.588	-1.403	-3.736	.000
Female		5.296	2.471			
Male	Leadership	6.571	2.608	-.255	-.644	.521
Female		6.827	2.713			

Likewise, significant differences according to gender (Table 7) were found in “Consideration towards others” ($t=-5.184$; $p=.000$), “Self-control in social relations” ($t=-2.523$; $p=.012$), and “Social anxiety/shyness” ($t=-3.736$; $p=.000$).

DISCUSSION

This sample’s results offered confirmation for the majority of our investigation’s hypothesis. Indeed, it appears that family factors, environmental factors and individual factors all play some role in socialization and, therefore, in the level of adjustment of social behaviours.



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Regarding family relations, our results indicate that a better quality in parent-child relations influences socialization dimensions that are crucial for adopting adjusted social behaviours. Indeed, results show that acceptance and trust in the father-child relation foster consideration towards others, while acceptance, tolerance, and consistency in the mother-child relation promote self-control in social relations. Moreover, a general perception of harmony and well-being in the family and consistency in parent's behaviour prevented, in our sample, social isolation. In fact, the variables of family relations analysed had a significant effect on those socialization dimensions that correspond to the typical profile (above mentioned) of delinquents traced by Silva, Martorell and Clemente (1985), thus, being undoubtedly important protective factors for antisocial behaviours. However, not all family factors were related to social behaviours: variables related to family structure did not show significant results that allow us to establish an interaction between them and the adjustment of social behaviours. Therefore, there is no evidence that living in a traditional household means that children and adolescents will be less likely to adopt antisocial behaviours than those living in non-traditional households, nor is there evidence that the number of siblings or the order of birth may have a role in such behaviours.

On the other hand, the analysis of socioeconomic status presented significant results, and offered confirmation for our third hypothesis, that high socioeconomic status would be a protective factor for socialization. Actually, high socioeconomic status was, in our sample, related to better self-control in social relations, whereas low socioeconomic status related to higher scores in social isolation and in social anxiety/shyness.

Individual characteristics analysed – age and gender – had a significant relation with socialization. Age was found to negatively influence consideration towards others, self-control in social relations and leadership, which confirms the general belief in literature on this matter, that adolescence is a period marked by an increase in the prevalence of antisocial manifestations (Moffitt, 1993; Farrington, 2004). Differences in gender were also significant, allowing us to conclude that, in our sample, although social anxiety/shyness was lower in males, females had higher scores in consideration towards others and self-control in social relations than males, being therefore more protected against misadjusted social behaviours..

CONCLUSIONS

As initially intended, our study allowed us to point out some family, environmental and individual factors that are related to socialization and may promote socially adjusted trajectories and prevent antisocial behaviours. This way, we were able to confirm general assumptions of many authors that study antisocial tendencies (Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998; Farrington, 2004; Farrington, & Welsh, 2007; Fonseca, 2004; Rutter, 2004; Lahey, & Waldman, 2004; Born, 2005; Sampson, & Laub, 2005; DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008; Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2008; Tremblay, 2010).

In our study's sample family protective factors included a good family atmosphere, acceptance and trust in the relation with the father and tolerance, acceptance and consistency in the relation with the mother. High socioeconomic status was found to be an environmental factor related to higher self-control in social relations and to social inclusion, thus, being a factor that may contribute for adjusted social behaviours. Age and gender were, as well, found to be significant predictors of socialization.

Such conclusions constitute important clues for intervention with antisocial children and adolescents. In fact, many developmental models have suggested that "interventions that would target putative causal factors (...) have the potential to modify the postulated developmental trajectories" (Lacourse et al., 2002, 910). Hence, based on our results, we can anticipate that primary prevention programs should focus especially on males and on individuals with a low socioeconomic status, since



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those are more likely to present a socialization pattern that make them more prone to manifest antisocial tendencies. Moreover, prevention programs would be more effective if they were designed and applied to children before they transition to adolescence. In fact, with adolescence, there seems to be a tendency for a decrease in important socialization aspects like consideration towards others and self-control in social relations, which points out to the importance of developing interventions before problems rise, that is, before individuals enter adolescence. Another interesting implication can be taken from results obtained with the analysis of family relations, that is, the importance of designing prevention/intervention programs that include the children's parents and promote acceptance, trust, tolerance and consistency in the family. So, accordingly to a developmental-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1995), in order to promote positive youth development we need not only school and community-based programs but also family-based prevention programs.

This investigation is far from being thorough, since it did not directly address antisocial behaviours and offenders and only individuals' perceptions of their own conditions were evaluated. The fact that our results only allow a description of significant factors rather than an explanation of the dynamics involved in each important variable is also an acknowledged limitation. In addition, the sample was occasional and some compared groups were not balanced in terms of their numbers (e.g. household composition and age). However, it is our belief that this can be an important starting point for future investigations, offering valuable clues for thorough studies that can result in a wider knowledge and enlightenment regarding conditions involved in social behaviours and the promotion of socially adjusted trajectories in childhood and adolescence.

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