Social Background, Gender and Self-reported Social Competence in 11- and 12-year-old Andalusian Children

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Although the study of Social Competence is now firmly established, certain studies are still needed to delineate the circumstances and variations found in different age groups. In particular, self-evaluation of social competence is a necessary point of view, and has been studied less than evaluations performed by the teacher or by peers, in reference to the school context. The objective of this paper is to examine differences in various measurements of social competence in sixth-grade primary students (11-12 year-olds) who attend three schools from different sociocultural contexts: inner-city, middle income, and suburban. We also examined gender differences.

Method. We administered a series of questionnaires that measure appropriate and inappropriate social skills, empathy, aggressiveness, assertiveness, and passivity towards adults and towards peers. Gender and social context were independent variables considered for the analysis. The dependent variables were 12 social skills and behavioral problems that made up the composite measurement of social competence which we used.

Results. Results show that empathy, inappropriate assertiveness and jealousy/isolation vary as a function of the interaction between gender and social context. The only fundamental effect due to gender was found in the impulsiveness variable, with the boys showing higher scores. The fundamental effect of social context proved more powerful than that of gender, also revealing differences in several variables not involved in the interaction.

Discussion. Differences relating to social context are interpreted as a function of cultural variations in the criteria with which skillful social behavior is evaluated. This is due to differing characteristics between disadvantaged and comfortable environments; these may be more or less demanding in the meeting of social objectives associated with children and adolescents in their upbringing, whether at home or in school contexts.

Keywords: self-reported social competence, preadolescents, gender, social context.

Introduction

Social competence is a complex construct. Its definition involves divergent views of social competence that operationalise different aspects. Despite their differences, most researchers agree that social competence entails effective functioning within social contexts (Cavell, 1990). Social competence is a wide and relevant field, then, which is thought to have decisive importance in mental health (Cichetti and Bukowiski, 1995; Parker, Rubin, Price and DeRosier, 1995), and as a developmental task (i.e. Asher and Parker, 1989, 1991). It is also an educational objective of the first order (in our country, Monjas, 2002; Trianes, 1996; Trianes, Blanca, Muñoz, García, Cardelle-Elawar and Infante, 2002; Trianes and Fernández- Figarés, 2000, Trianes and García Correa, 2002).

From the point of view of psychoeducational evaluation, one of the widest definitions considers social competence as the sum of judgments elicited about a child by her/his relevant social agents. Far from considering it a concept strictly linked to specific social skills, today social competence is considered to have a more general nature (McConnell and Odom, 1986; Cavell, 1990). It can even be understood as a general factor present across varying situations (Bracken and Crain, 1994).

Social context is very important in the evaluation of the social behavior. The latter adjusts to context criteria, which are considered by evaluation agents. People of all ages already know these criteria and they know that they are going to be evaluated according to them. This is why the evaluation of skilled behavior includes influences of gender, age, the speaker's role, situations and specific contexts in which this behavior is carried out. It also includes other variables that differentiate skilled behavior from unskilled behavior, always according to the context.

Therefore, measurement of social competence takes place in cultural and community-specific contexts. There is research consensus around the belief that different contexts are associated with different results in children's social competence. Context affects risk factors in two ways (Soriano and Soriano, 1994). Firstly, it can protect against risk factors by supplying norms, values, a support system, helping to construct a positive sense of oneself, and providing a model for. Secondly, it can fail in this protection against risk when it is

weakened by hostile social and economic factors. It can also be weakened by processes of exclusion by the dominant society, falling into a culture of outsiders (Roberts, Garritz and Kearney, 1990).

There is extensive bibliography that recounts the existence of aggressive and violent behaviors among adolescent and young adults in impoverished environments, with low socio-economic status, economic problems and scarcity of community resources (Guerra, Huesmann, Tolin, Acker y Eron, 1995). Effects associated with gender and socio-economic status have also been found. According to these differences, boys seem to show more social problems than girls in families of low socio-economic status (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, and Zak; 1985; Verhalst, Akkerhuis and Althaus, 1985; Heimer, 1997).

Specifically, self-evaluation shows peculiar characteristics that differentiate it from evaluation carried out by external agents (teachers and peers) (Trianes, Blanca, Muñoz, García, Cardelle-Elawar and Infante, 2002). Students and teachers can use different criteria in order to judge competent behavior (Trianes, Muñoz, Blanca, Sánchez, and García, 1999). Teenaged students with aggressive behavior can show bias when self-evaluating their social competence (Baumeister, Smart and Boden, 1996; Colvin, Bloch and Funder, 1996; Raskin, Novacek and Hogan, 1991; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi and Lagerspetz, 1999). Gender is also a source of difference in self-evaluating social skills and it is connected with self-concept in several different ways (Koestner and Aube, 1995).

The present study seeks to analyze differences in specific aspects of self-assessed social competence which are produced as a function of gender and of social background, and as a function of the interaction of these two factors. These aspects are: appropriate social skills, assertiveness, aggressivity and passivity towards adults and peers, empathy, inappropriate assertiveness, impulsivity, jealousy/withdrawal and overconfidence. It is also common that research on gender or social class includes social skills and antisocial behavior as reference measures (Prior, Smart, Sansón and Oberklaid, 1993; Soriano and Soriano, 1994). For this reason, in this paper we consider analyze social competence based on self-assessment measures elicited from 11-12 years old students, including skills and problems pertaining to social behavior.

Method

Participants

The study was carried out using a sample of 96 eleven- and twelve-year-old students from suburban, inner-city or middle-income backgrounds in Malaga, Spain, a city of 700,000 inhabitants. All were in 6th grade. Of the 96 students, about half were male (n= 50) and half female (n= 46). The three schools were selected on the basis of the school's willingness to participate in the study. From the first school, in an inner-city area, 21 children (7 males and 14 females) participated; their families had problems of some kind, and were of low socio-economic class. The second school, in a suburban area, was a private school in an area with high socio-economic level, and 45 children from two classrooms (25 males and 20 females) participated. From the third school 27 students (18 males and 9 females) participated; they represent a middle socio-economic class. This last school is situated in a semi-rural area in the city. Although we do not assess social backgrounds in more detail, the different settings in which the three schools are situated are differentiated by numerous social, economic and cultural indicators, well known by our community's institutions and social agents.

Procedure

In the analysis, independent variables were gender and social background. The dependent variables were 12 social skills and problem behaviors which formed our composite social competence measure. Instruments were applied to the participants in the middle of the school year. We selected this time of year because we assumed that the students would be better adjusted to the school, without tensions typical of the beginning or end of the year. All tests were presented to all children in their classrooms in two sessions on different days. They had a one-hour break in each session.

Instruments

The following instruments evaluate the variables from self-reported points of view.

1) **The Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY),** developed by Matson, Rotatori and Helsel (1983), measures the extent to which children employ appropriate social skills during their classroom interactions. It is a well-known questionnaire

in the social competence assessment area and its psychometric properties have been researched systematically with satisfactory results among the American population (Helsen and Matson, 1984; Kazdin, Matson and Elveldt-Dawson, 1984; Matson, Macklin and Helsel, 1985; Matson and Ollendick, 1988; Spence and Liddle, 1990), and in the Spanish population (Mendez, Hidalgo and Ingles, 2002). In order to use it for this research, test items have been translated and adapted by the researchers themselves (see Attachment 1).   Internal consistency was assessed by computing a Cronbach alpha coefficient, which was .89.

The questionnaire, addressed to students, uses a four-point answer scale: never, sometimes, often and always. The following five factors are considered:

- *Appropriate Social Skills* with 24 items. They measure positive aspects of peer interaction, such as negotiation, assertiveness and prosocial behavior. Examples: "I have many friends," " I show my feelings," "I feel good if I help someone."

- *Inappropriate Assertiveness* with 16 items. This variable evaluates aggression and other overt inappropriate social behaviors. Examples: "I threaten people or act like a bully," "I get into fights a lot," "I speak (interrupting) when someone else is speaking."

- *Impulsivity* with five items. Examples: "I become angry easily," "I am bossy."

- *Overconfidence* with five items. Examples: "I brag about myself," "I explain things more than I need to."

- *Jealousy/withdrawal* with four items. Examples: "I feel angry or jealous when someone else does well," "I feel lonely."

2) **The Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents** was developed by Bryant (1982), with 22 yes/no items. Example: "I become sad when I see another child crying". The author assessed internal consistency by computing Cronbach alpha coefficients which were .68 for the fourth graders, and .79 for the seventh graders. Test-retest reliability coefficients were r(108)= -81 for the fourth graders using a yes/no format, and r(80) =.83 using a nine-point response format on the empathy index for adolescents.

3) **The Children's Assertiveness Behaviour Scale (CABS),** developed by Michelson, Wood, and Kazdin (1983), measures three types of behavior: assertive, passive, and aggressive. The situations, a total of five, refer to interaction both with adults and with peers. In this self-reported instrument, students selected the type of social skill/behavior they would

use when presented with a hypothetical problematic situation. Participants are asked to select one of five options, two are aggressive, two are passive, and one assertive. The five situations presented are: (a) reacting positively; (b) reacting negatively; (c) complying with rules; (d) listening and (e) being sensitive. The six variables are:

- Assertiveness towards adults
- Assertiveness towards peers
- Aggressivity towards adults
- Aggressivity towards peers
- Passivity towards adults
- Passivity towards peers

Results

A 2x3 between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the variables from the MESSY, CABS and empathy scale. The independent variables were gender and social background, with three levels: inner-city, suburban and middle-income. With the use of Wilks's criterion, the main effect of gender was significant [$F(24,150)=10.11$; $p<.01$], as well as the main effect of social background [$F(12,75)= 4.3$; $p<.01$] and the interaction between the two factors [$F(24,150)=1.9$; $p=.01$].

In order to determine the contribution of each dependent variable to the interaction and to the principal effects, a step-down analysis was performed. The principal effects were analysed only for those variables which were not statistically significant in the interaction.

In the step-down analysis for the interaction, the highest-priority DV was Inappropriate Assertiveness, which was tested in a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results showed statistical significance [$F(2,86)=6.13$; $MSE=154.24$; $p<.01$], indicating that boys gave higher scores than girls in the inner-city group (figure 1). The rest of the DVs were tested in a series of analyses of covariance (ANCOVA), so that each DV was tested with higher-priority DVs as covariate to see if it added to the combination of DVs already tested (Tabachnik and Fidell, 1989). Thus, the variable Empathy was tested in an ANCOVA with Inappropriate Assertiveness as covariate. The analysis revealed a significant contribution from this variable

[F(2,85)=3.37; MSE=5.8; p=.039]. The adjusted means are shown in figure 2. Results show that boys gave lower scores in Empathy than girls in inner-city and suburban groups.

Subsequent ANCOVAs were performed with the rest of the variables as DV and with Inappropriate Assertiveness and Empathy as covariates. The only significant variable was Jealousy/Withdrawal [F(2.84)=3.24; MSE=7; p=.04], whose means are shown in figure 3. The data indicate that the greatest gender-based differences appear in the inner-city group, where boys have lower scores in this variable.

In the step-down analysis for gender, only Impulsivity was found to contribute to predicting differences between males and females, the males being more impulsive (M=8.8) than females (M=7.9). The rest of the variables were not significant.

In the step-down analysis for social backgrounds, the highest-priority DV was *Appropriate Social Skills*, which was tested in a univariate ANOVA. The results showed statistical significance [F(2.89)=30.2; MSE=71,6; p<.01], indicating that the score for self-perceived Appropriate Social Skills is lower in the suburban group than in the two other groups. The next variable that contributed to the differences, with Appropriate Social Skills as covariate, was *Aggressivity Towards Adults* [F(2,88)=4.8; p=.01]. The multiple comparisons of the adjusted means show that the inner-city group shows a higher level than the suburban group, with no differences between the suburban and the middle-income groups. Other significant variables were: Assertiveness Towards Adults [F(2,87)=6.2; p<.01], Passivity Towards Adults [F(2,86)=12.3; p<.01], Aggressivity Towards Peers [F(2,85)=4.8; p=.01] and Overconfidence [F(2,84)=6.6; p<.01]. The adjusted means are shown in table 1. The mean of *Assertiveness Towards Adults* indicates that the middle-income group gave lower scores than the other two groups. Regarding *Passivity Towards Adults*, the middle-income group showed greater passivity than the inner-city group, and this group in its turn showed greater passivity than the suburban group. Finally, this last group gave higher scores in *Aggressivity Towards Peers* and *Overconfidence* than the other two.

Table 1. Adjusted mean of Appropriate Social Skills, Aggressivity towards Adults, Assertiveness towards Adults, Passivity towards Adults, Aggressivity Towards Peers and Overconfidence as a function of Social Background.

Variables	Middle-income group (1)	Inner-city group (2)	suburban group (3)	Multiple comparison (p<.05)
Appropriate Social Skills	72.86	67.89	57.41	1-3, 2-3
Aggressivity Towards Adults	5.62	8.63	3.83	2-3
Assertiveness Towards Adults	10.48	13.88	14.77	1-2, 1-3
Passivity Towards Adults	17.67	13.96	10.59	1-2, 1-3 2-3
Aggressivity Towards Peers	6.81	6.24	12.52	2-3, 1-3 (p=.06)
Overconfidence	9.74	9.05	11.87	1-3, 2-3 1-2 (p=.06)

Figure 1. Mean of Inappropriate Assertiveness as a function of Social Background and gender.
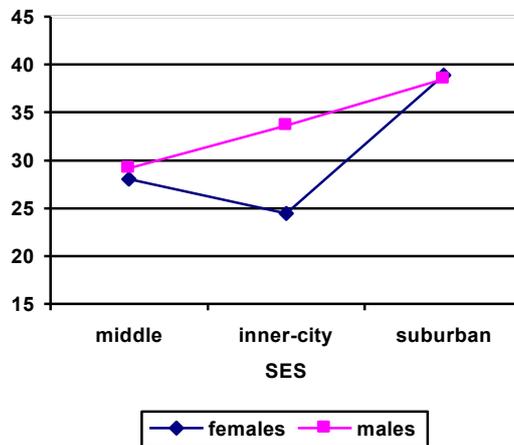
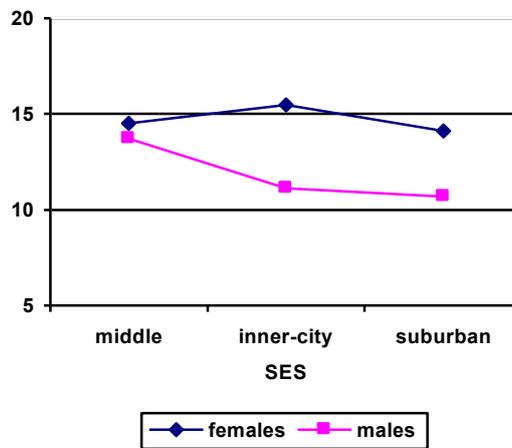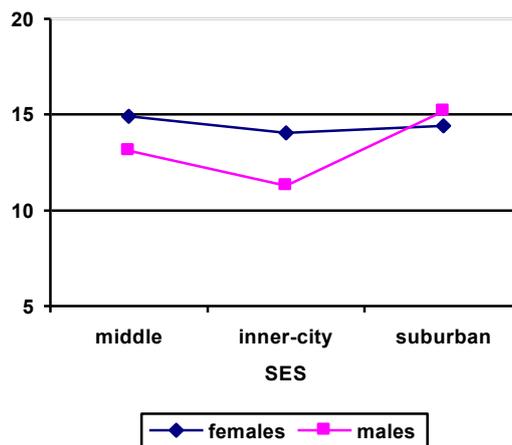**Figure 2. Adjusted mean in Empathy as a function of Social Background and gender**.

Figure 3. Adjusted mean in Jealousy/Withdrawal as a function of Social Background and gender.

Discussion

Gender effect

In this study, one principal effect of gender emerged, with boys exhibiting higher rates of self-evaluated impulsivity. Gender differences did not vary as a function of middle-income, urban and suburban community. This result has been found in other studies which also evaluated the effects of gender and social background on impulsivity, distinguishing between rural and urban settings (Hope and Bierman, 1998).

The term Impulsivity refers to the activity of doing and saying things without being aware of any risk involved (Eysenck, Easting and Person, 1984). Impulsivity is a key criterion for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatry Association, 1987). There exists extensive research literature focusing on the relationship of impulsivity to aggressive, antisocial, delinquent behavior (Farrington, 1989; Luengo, Carrillo de la Peña, Otero, and Romero, 1994). Impulsivity is partly responsible for a lower teacher evaluation of boys' social conduct compared to that of girls (Dykeman, C., Daehlin, W., Doyle, S. and Flamer, H.S. 1996). In social problem-solving research, automatic and impulsive responses are negatively related to social competence. When responding impulsively, aggressive boys offer few verbally-assertive solutions and more conflict-escalating solutions, as compared to nonaggressive boys (Rabiner, Lenhart and Lochman, 1990). But this relation is not found among girls.

In our study in which the measure used is self-assessment, it seems that two potential consequences can be derived from this result: a) our self-evaluation measure was found to coincide with teacher and peer evaluation in other studies, in identifying boys as more impulsive than girls, b) amongst the variables used in this study no other difference appeared between boys and girls. Perhaps the differences are more subtle, and they may appear in more exhaustive studies. However, it should be pointed out that gender differences also appear in empathy and other variables though these are dependent on social background.

Effects of social background

Social background produced more differences than gender, some of which were rather unexpected. The fact that self-assessed appropriate social skills were scored higher by inner-city groups than the suburban group, is surprising as other studies based on evaluation by others indicate that low SES adolescents were likely to have learned more aggressive and inappropriate patterns of interaction with parents and peers (Heimer, 1997), and that children growing up in economically disadvantaged communities represent a population with an elevated risk of developing aggressive and problematic behavior (Farrington, 1991).   In addition, the middle-income group score higher than the suburban group.

To explain this result it is necessary to return to the subjective elements of social competence which stem from personal factors rather than from external constraints such as,

for example, belief in social values, belief in moral order and beliefs about what is right and wrong (Hawkins, Catalano, Morrinson, O'Donnell and Day, 1992). Taking into account the important weight of these elements in self-assessment, we suggest that suburban children may possibly have interiorised more demanding rules, thus judging themselves more severely than the other two groups in relation to specific criteria of social competence. In other words, this group may be more critical of their behavior since they have learned more demanding criteria in defining what is socially appropriate, typical of more comfortable social contexts.

An alternative explanation could be that, as a recent study highlights (Salmivalli, Kauliainen, Kaistaniemi and Lagerspetz, 1999), low scores on traditional self-esteem scales could reflect a cautious, conservative, self-protective orientation, whereas high scores could be a manifestation of a risky, self-aggrandising style of presenting oneself. Or high scores could also be caused by a defense mechanism (Schneider and Turkat, 1975). Either of these two tendencies would be difficult to differentiate from a genuine or healthy high self-esteem using traditional instruments such as the MESSY scale used in this study.

A weak point in previous explanations is shown by the higher scores among the suburban group in Overconfidence, a factor which, because of its contents: "I brag about myself," "I think I know it all," "I act like I am better than other people," seems to refer to an aggrandising, narcissistic view of self, caused either by a defensive refusal to believe anything negative about oneself, or by constant attention-seeking and self-enhancing behavior. The other two items in this factor: "I stay with others too long" and "I explain things more than I need to" represent a critical point of view towards oneself. However, cultural studies show that people in Western cultures take credit for their successes, explain away their failures, and, in various ways, try to aggrandise themselves (Miller, 1986; Whitley and Frieze, 1985), and they often show self-favorability bias (Harter, 1990). Regardless, if we doubt whether "overconfidence" has a normative or healthy character, we cannot explain why these students, who gave the lowest scores in Appropriate social skill score higher than the other two groups in Overconfidence.

Now we examine aggressive, assertive and passive behavior towards teachers and peers. The model used by Michelson et al (1983), on which the test we applied was based, indicates that the assertive response involves a balance between imposing our needs on others,

an aggressive response, and at the other extreme giving in and putting up with things, which is the passive response. There is therefore a relationship between these three variables, since greater assertivity may mean a lower aggressive or passive response, and therefore greater skill. Thus we may deduce that an assertive response is a socialised response to an aggressive one, with these authors defending the education of an assertive response as a means to prevent agressivity in children and adolescents. The model also assumes that relationships with teachers and adults take place in a different context from those with peers.

Only responses to teachers or adults are affected by social backgrounds. Only the suburban group fulfilled the relationships expected according to the model. These students score higher in assertiveness and lower in passivity and aggressivity towards teachers and adults. Assertivity is a social skill which avoids aggressivity because it allows needs to be expressed without interfering with the rights of other people, following the norms of courtesy or politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Taking into account that what is considered assertive behavior is defined by specific social rules for different situations and contexts, we may think that suburban school norms permit and encourage assertive behavior as a more skillful way of expressing feelings, desires, opinions or needs, without having to be aggressive.

The middle-income group also shows a coherent pattern of relationships between these three variables which is different from that of the suburban group. This is characterised by a low score in aggressivity and assertivity towards teachers and a high score in passivity, suggesting that in these contexts, the passive attitude, which may be regarded perhaps as traditional respect for the teacher, is more highly valued.

Therefore, the inner-city group gave the most incoherent results, as it gave a high score in aggressivity, high assertivity and medium passivity in relationships with adults. This does not appear to be a healthy situation. As for the high score in aggressivity towards teachers and adults, this may be considered one of the worst types of inappropriate behavior in the school environment. It is considered as even worse than aggressivity between peers. The fact that inner-city students score higher in this measure than the other two groups may be because the three contexts may represent quite different communities in terms of their school context. Effects of the more violent urban communities and the denser congregation of high-

risk children in classrooms may thus increase the risk of children developing disruptive and aggressive behavioral problems at school (Hope and Bierman, 1998). Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Muñoz and Boles, (1996) also report that school psychologists find more school violence problems in inner-city areas (14.3%) compared to suburban areas (4.9%) and middle-income areas (0%). In Spanish schools we also have the idea that the worst school environments occur in inner-city and run-down urban areas.

We cannot explain why these inner-city students have at the same time high scores in assertivity and aggressivity and a medium score in passivity towards teachers and adults. These results seem to contradict the relationships expected according to the model used by Michelson et al. Perhaps the power-submission balance established in these socio-economically disadvantaged contexts is different, and a child with interpersonal conflicts with adults behaves firstly aggressively and assertively, and according to the intensification of the adult's response the child comes to be controlled and to understand that they must show conformity and passivity. This would explain why, in a synchronic analysis, the three scores seem to function independently of each other. In any case, in such a context adolescents are exposed to aggressive models, are more likely to have their aggressive actions reinforced, and there may be normative beliefs which support the use of aggressivity in interpersonal problem solving, unlike in the other two contexts.

In regard to responses toward peers only the aggressive response was statistically significant. Given that the peer context is different from that of adults, we will analyze how the averages change from one score to another in the different socio-economic contexts studied. The suburban group gave a higher score than the others in aggressivity towards peers. This group, which gave a low score in aggressivity towards adults, changes completely when relationships with peers are assessed. The inner-city and middle-income groups hardly change their average scores from one type of relationship to another. However, while middle-income students increase their average, inner-city ones reduce theirs. This result leads us to suppose that, in the suburban, and perhaps middle-income contexts, the criteria for problem solving varies according to both the type of relationship involved and the type of social context reference.

Interaction between gender and social background

Three variables show the effect of a joint influence of gender and social background. One of these is Empathy which other studies link with gender. Girls do not give different scores when the three social background groups are compared with each other, whilst boys show more empathy in the middle-income context than in the two urban contexts. Girls perceived themselves as being more helpful and empathic than boys. Only in the middle-income group are both sexes equal. Girls' superiority in self-perceived empathy has been well established (Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski and Wang, 1995). Traustadottir (1991) suggests that these results could be explained with regard to the socialisation process of males versus females. Women's primary responsibilities are still considered to be within the family, e.g. childrearing and caring. Over time, these norms can become internalised, with females becoming more nurturing and caring than males (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Crowley, 1986).

Another result due to the interaction of gender and social background were scores in Inappropriate Assertiveness. This result can be explained from two different perspectives. On one hand, only in the inner-city group are the averages of girls and boys different. A possible explanation could be that in the urban context, a different social consideration is assigned to these behaviors for girls and for boys, while in the other two contexts these evaluations tend to converge. The third variable that registers interaction is Jealousy/Withdrawal. In this regard, there is a difference between boys and girls in the inner-city context and no difference in the residential context.

On the other hand, the highest averages for both girls and boys are shown by the suburban group. This factor contains items which all refer to relationships with peers, with types of behavior ranging from aggressivity: "I threaten people or act like a bully," or "I get into fights a lot", to behavior such as "I speak too loudly", or "I make fun of others," which could more accurately be referring to rules of courtesy and politeness. The suburban group (without differing between gender) also scored higher than others in regard to peers in the test of Michelson et al (1983). All these results are related, of course, and they have to do with different criteria for judging unskilled/skilled behaviors in each context, as has been mentioned before. The suburban group has a higher average in regard to Jealousy/ Withdrawal, too.

This work highlights the internal relationships and contradictions of self-assessment among children of 11-12 years of age, nearing preadolescence. The use of self-reporting, undoubtedly, has the risk of personal bias and is subject to cognitive errors and to defensive or self-enhancing positions which may distort the average. On the other hand, it is necessary to express the adolescent's own point of view, which is of great value when facing diagnosis and treatment of problems in social relations. It should be pointed out that the perspective of gender does not give rise to differences without the interaction of social background, which has a much greater effect on the self-appraisal of social competence in this study. This leads us to emphasise the necessity of evaluating personal competencies, with all the complex relationships they show in different factors of the subject's microsystem.

This study could be improved by including other less traditional measures of self-concept and self-esteem, which could help to clarify the interpretation of scores regarding defensive or self-enhancing perspectives, which should not be considered skillful. Finally, on evaluating the characteristics of the contexts studied, it could be helpful to examine norms and values that govern social relationships, in order to more precisely interpret the differences found due to different social situations.

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