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Parenting and social competence in school: The role of preadolescents' personality traits☆

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ABSTRACT

In a study of 230 preadolescent students (mean age 11.3 years) from the wider area of Athens, Greece, the role of Big Five personality traits (i.e. Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Extraversion) in the relation between parenting dimensions (overprotection, emotional warmth, rejection, anxious rearing) and social competence in school was examined. Multiple sets of regression analyses were performed. Main effects of Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience were identified. Limited evidence for moderation and some support of gender-specific parenting was found. Agreeableness and Extraversion interacted with paternal overprotection, whereas Neuroticism interacted with maternal and paternal rejection in predicting social competence. Mean differences in gender and educational grade were reported. The relationship between environmental effects (such as parenting during early adolescence) and social adjustment in school is discussed in terms of the plasticity and malleability of the preadolescents' personality characteristics.

Social competence has been a diverse concept in psychological thinking. It is considered a part of psychosocial adjustment or in other cases almost synonymous to it (Goldfried & D'Zurilla, 1973; Trower, 1982, cited in Campbell, Hansen, & Nangle, 2010). Several theoretical models have been proposed in the attempt to conceptualize social competence. The Social Information Processing Model outlines the cognitive processes underlying social interactions (Crick & Dodge, 1994). In any given social situation, six steps of thought are involved. The mental operations that are considered include paying selective attention to social cues, mentally representing and interpreting the cues (attribution of intent), selecting desired outcomes by clarifying goals, accessing the behavioral scripts from memory (in order to produce possible social responses), decision making (evaluating the possibilities and selecting an appropriate response) and behavioral enactment and evaluation of the selected response (Dodge & Rabiner, 2004). In a similar perspective, Rose-Krasnor (1997) proposed a theoretical framework ("Prism Model") in which social competence is "generally recognized as effectiveness in interaction, considered from both self and other perspectives" and stressed out its transactional, context-dependent, performance-oriented and goal specific characteristics. Gresham (1981) identified three subdomains of social competence. Adaptive behavior represents the degree to which a person has achieved independent and responsible behavior. Social skills are social behaviors that enable a person to interact with others eliciting positive responses and avoiding negative ones. Peer acceptance describes peer relations, namely the degree to which a person is accepted or rejected by others. Katz and McClellan (1997) included such elements as

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the ability to regulate emotions, the knowledge and experience of social interactions and the understanding of social situations and customs.

A vast body of literature has examined the relationship between adjustment, parenting and the child's personality, relying mostly on main effects models. Most studies on psychosocial adjustment hypothesize that consistent responsive and demanding parenting create a sufficient disciplinary environment for the development of psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents (e.g. Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Slicker, 1998), whereas, a demanding parenting style alone correlates to several negative outcomes, such as dysfunctional peer relations, insecurity, aggression and fear (e.g. Kaufmann, Gesten, & Santa Lucia, 2000). Further research on demanding parenting practices associates overprotection, especially on the part of the mother, with experiences of victimization in school (Georgiou, 2008) and, even, with social phobia (Arrindell et al., 1989). Muris (2006) reports evidence for the relation of anxious rearing practices and the neuroticism trait to the development and adoption of maladjustment schemas, such as impaired autonomy and performance, low orientation towards others, excessive control, disconnection, rejection and impaired boundaries.

Responsive parenting, exhibited as emotional warmth and acceptance is, also, a significant variable in relation to social adjustment. Parents who are considered emotionally warmer and less likely to resort to punishment would bring up more emotionally stable, extraverted, sociable and empathic adolescents (Aluja, del Barrio, & Garcia, 2005). Moreover, children's and adolescents' perception of parental support/acceptance is positively correlated to the sense of self-value and social efficiency (Rubin et al., 2004), as well as interpersonal communication, decision making, maintaining a healthy way of life and identity development (Slicker, Picklesimer, Guzak, & Fuller, 2005). Evidence for the association of parental rejection with psychological maladjustment of children with specific personality dispositions is manifested in several studies all over the world (Khaleque & Rohner, 2005). In general, the connection between the exertion of parental control and psychological adjustment is less consistently indicated in the literature, than the relation between parental emotional warmth and psychosocial adjustment (Bradley et al., 2001 cited in Zupančič & Kavčič, 2011).

The differential role of parents' gender in the relationship between adolescent social adjustment and the provision of parental support and control is highlighted in several studies. For instance, Laible and Carlo (2004) found that high levels of perceived maternal support and low levels of maternal rigid control (but not paternal) were related to adolescents' reports of sympathy, social competence and self-worth. Hall and Bracken (1996) reported that adolescents, who perceived their mothers as more receptive and warm, related more efficiently with other people. Those who perceived their mothers as receptive and, at the same time, demanding showed the best results in interpersonal relations (Slicker et al., 2005) and prosocial behavior (Campbell, 2002 cited in Zupančič & Kavčič, 2011). Moreover, in a study by Drozdz and Pokorski (2007) maternal control exerted through responsive practices fostered more their sons' interpersonal behavior than their daughters'. Contrariwise, in a study of Chinese early adolescents only paternal warmth predicted social and school achievement, while maternal warmth predicted emotional adjustment (Chen, Liu, & Li, 2000). The role of paternal acceptance during childhood and adolescence in women developing healthy interpersonal relations was identified, also, in a study by Dresner and Grolnick (1996).

The research on the main effects of temperament/personality on social competence environment is, also, dominant in psychological thinking. Although controversy exists as to the distinct differences between personality and temperament — the latter being defined in terms of differences in habits and skills based in perception, while the former in terms of individual differences in concept-based goals and values (e.g. Cloninger, 1994), recent publications consider the distinction as non-substantive (De Pauw, Mervielde, & Van Leeuwen, 2009; Kavčič, Podlesek, & Zupančič, 2012). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that the five-factor model (FFM) of personality, proposed by McCrae and John (1992), adequately represents the personality structure of adults (McCrae & Costa, 1999) and also of children and adolescents (John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994). According to this formulation, neuroticism is considered a tendency towards negative emotional reactions, vulnerability to stress and hopeless frustration. Conscientiousness is the ability for self-discipline, dutifulness and self-regulation of impulses, remaining focused on achievement. Openness to experience is a tendency towards intellectual curiosity, openness to emotion and eagerness to attempt new things. Agreeableness characterizes individuals that get along with others, are kind, trusting and willing to collaborate. Extraversion delineates the tendency towards interaction with others, assertiveness, liveliness and action-orientation (McCrae & Costa, 1999).

Many studies examine the role of personality as a predictive factor for the adjustment of children and its relation to parenting. Agreeableness and extraversion have been related to social competence (Kavčič et al., 2012), while neuroticism (negatively), extraversion and conscientiousness (positively) have been associated with peer adjustment and peer cooperation (Lamb, Chuang, Wessels, Broberg, & Hwang, 2002). Children with high levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience and low levels of neuroticism are prone to be more resilient and perform better in their adult life (Shiner & Masten, 2012). Self-absorbed youths, on the other hand, seem more susceptible to avoiding relations and feeling lonely (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). Furthermore, personality is associated with parenting in many ways. Prinzie et al. (2003) and van Leeuwen, Mervielde, Braet, and Bosmans (2004) report that less conscientious children attract more demanding parenting practices, such as shouts, pressure and monitoring. Children exhibiting signs of vulnerability, such as hyperactive behavior or neurotic characteristics are associated with more overprotective parenting (Kendler, Sham, & MacLean, 1997). On the contrary, other studies have failed to identify a significant contribution of child characteristics to parenting dimensions (e.g. Verhoeven, Junger, van Aken, Dekovic, & van Aken, 2007).

Over the years, a shift in the understanding of parenting influence on the psychosocial adjustment of children has occurred from the parent-oriented unidirectional approach to the bidirectional parent–child approach, emphasizing both the parent's