



Friendship in children with internalizing and externalizing problems: A preliminary investigation with the Pictorial Assessment of Interpersonal Relationships



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 March 2013

Received in revised form 8 May 2013

Accepted 8 May 2013

Available online 15 May 2013

Keywords:

Friendship

Internalizing

Externalizing

Early childhood

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between friendship representation and internalizing and externalizing problems in school-aged children. One hundred Caucasian 6–7 year-old children (50 males and 50 females) and their mothers took part in the study. The Draw-a-Man Test, the Pictorial Assessment of Interpersonal Relationships, and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/6–18) were used. Children with internalizing problems, externalizing problems, comorbid internalizing and externalizing problems, and a control group were compared on their pictorial representations of friendship. Results showed that children with externalizing problems included more pictorial indices of each friend's autonomy and a larger imbalance of importance between them; children with internalizing problems drew themselves as less similar to their friends. In conclusion, children's pictorial representation allows exploring some aspects of their tacit knowledge about the relationship with a best friend, which is not easily expressed verbally by young children. Finally, the implications of these findings for theoretical and empirical research development on friendship are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Friendship and children's well-being

The relevance of friendship for children's socialization is well known among developmental psychologists (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Dunn, 2004; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Several studies have demonstrated the psychological benefits provided by friendship during middle childhood and adolescence: the number of friends and the quality of the relationships are strongly associated with the development of social skills and emotional adjustment (Baiocco, D'Alessio, & Laghi, 2009; Berndt, 2004; Glick & Rose, 2011; Nangle & Erdley, 2001; Pallini & Laghi, 2012).

In the last decade, scholars have begun to focus their attention on peer relationships in clinical populations, including children with internalizing and externalizing behaviors (van Lier & Koot, 2010). The distinction between "externalizing" and "internalizing" behaviors is often used in developmental clinical psychology (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1986). Externalizing behaviors consist of negative actions directed towards other people or the physical environment (i.e., aggression and disruption), while internalizing behaviors such as somatic complaints,

feelings of anxiety or depression, and social withdrawal affect the child's internal world. This distinction does not imply a perfect dichotomy: In fact, there is a significant co-morbidity between externalizing and internalizing conducts. Children showing externalizing and/or internalizing behaviors often have difficulties with self-control, emotional self-regulation, and social interaction with peers, including friends (Cicchetti & Toth, 1991).

It seems that, by late childhood, internalizing and externalizing disorders have already affected the child's ability to form and/or maintain satisfactory dyadic relationships with peers (Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). More precisely, it has been found that children who showed internalizing symptoms at 9 years of age had fewer intimate relationships with their friends 2 years later (Klima & Repetti, 2008); at about the same age, withdrawn children, who tended to associate with peers with similar problems, reported a lower friendship quality than a control group (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce, & Burgess, 2006). Partially convergent results were also obtained by Fordham and Stevenson-Hinde (1999) with children between 8 and 10 years of age who had been diagnosed as shy/withdrawn 4 years earlier; however, these authors found that, for these children, the objective ability to form a non-conflictual friendship was not compromised, and only their subjective evaluations of the relationships appeared to be impoverished. These results led Rubin et al. (2005) to conclude that children with internalizing disorders seem quite similar to their well-adjusted peers in terms of friendship formation and stability, even though they perceive their relationships as less satisfactory in terms of support and pleasure. This may be due in part to the well-known

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tendency to select friends who are similar to oneself (Hartup, 1989), which leads children with internalizing behavior to associate themselves with peers who share a certain degree of relational difficulty (Laghi et al. (2013); Mariano & Harton, 2005; Rubin, Bowker, & Gazelle, 2010; Rubin et al., 2006).

Children with externalizing behavior can be distinguished in two subgroups: *relationally* aggressive children, who behave poorly with their friends and have (not surprisingly) short-lived friendships (Bukowski, 2003; Poulin et al., 1997), and *overtly* aggressive children, who redirect their bad behaviors against other peers, sparing their own friends, with whom, however, they develop shallow relationships: friends are simply partners of provocative actions and not intimate companions (Gropeter & Crick, 1996). Moreover, aggressive children may also develop internalizing tendencies, so that the quality of their friendships may also be damaged by their anxiety and depression (Preddy & Fite, 2012).

Although any information about the quality of friendship experiences in clinical populations could be very useful for implementing socialization programs, there is a lack of data about younger children, just at those early ages when it would be possible to intervene with better chances of efficacy. This could be due, at least in part, to the difficulty of gathering valid information about children's perceptions of the relationships in which they are involved. In fact, children's friendships have been studied with a variety of procedures, corresponding to different perspectives. Some authors have focused on partners' interactions, especially with young children, and have used direct observation, in laboratory or in everyday environments (Dunn, 2004). Other scholars, however, have stressed the importance of going beyond the actual behavior, gathering information on children's representations of friendship, considering that the ideas and expectancies that a person maintains about a close relationship have a substantial effect on the relationship itself (Berscheid & Reiss, 1998; Hinde, 1979; Rogers, 2012).

Children's representations of friendship were studied initially using semi-structured interviews (Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980), and subsequently using more structured approaches, thanks to standardized questionnaires and scales (Furman, 1996). Drawing was virtually ignored, though it has a long tradition in developmental psychology as a means to understand children's interpersonal relationships (Burns & Kaufman, 1972; Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997; Leon, Wallace, & Rudy, 2007; Roe, Bridges, Dunn, & O'Connor, 2006). Its main advantage is that it is an activity generally enjoyed by children, which can be presented as an open task that is already familiar to them.

1.2. Methodological issues

One explanation for the scarcity of studies on relationships based on pictorial data could be the insufficient validity of many projective tests, especially when they are employed outside of individualized clinical settings (Thomas & Silk, 1990). Trying to overcome these limitations, Bombi, Pinto, and Cannoni (2007) developed, through several years of experience and empirical studies, a new procedure for collecting and coding drawings of interpersonal relationships. This instrument is called PAIR (Pictorial Assessment of Interpersonal Relationships); it is based on the modern literature on children's drawing (for a synthesis of this literature, see Cox, 2005; Jolley, 2010). With a series of experimental studies – focused on the *process* of drawing and not only on the drawing as a *finished product* – some scholars have been able to re-conceive drawing as a form of problem solving (Freeman & Cox, 1985), and not as an almost automatic reproduction of an internal conceptual model, as assumed by the classical theory of Luquet (1927) and its Piagetian adaptation (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). The child who draws engages himself or herself in “a search of equivalents” (Goodnow, 1977, p. 12) for the object to be depicted, and only a successful search will make the representation recognizable for the viewer (Willats, 2005). Hence, to “interpret” a child's picture one has to take into account all the procedural and conceptual constraints with which the

child must come to terms while drawing (Thomas & Silk, 1990). In spite of these difficulties and limitations, children's ability to draw human figures develops quite early. By 5 years of age, children can depict persons as *conventional figures* in which head, trunk, and limbs are denoted by separate regions, and several details of the face and body are already present (Cox, 1993). Moreover, during middle childhood, children become more and more able to represent action and space (Lange-Küttner & Vinter, 2008) and to include literal and metaphoric indices of emotions (Picard, Brechet, & Baldy, 2007). For these reasons, drawings of human figures can be used as a valid communication means with children starting from the last years of preschool, through middle childhood and adolescence.

Based on this literature, Bombi et al. (2007) have sought to develop an instrument called PAIR (Pictorial Assessment of Interpersonal Relationships), which would not require the assumption of unconscious defensive mechanisms, nor of uncertain symbolisms—an instrument which would only posit that some of children's ideas about social relationships could be visualized in their drawings. With a series of validating studies, these authors have identified some aspects of children's drawings that pertain to relevant features of social relationships and can be reliably measured: cohesion and distancing between the partners, and their similarity and comparative value (see Appendix A for more details).

Cohesion is the visible aspect of affiliation, which is the foundation of human social life (Duck, 1988) and a basic property of close relationships (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Kelley, 1983). Cohesion is shown in the drawings by means of the figures' interaction, and by metaphoric indices of their commitment, such as spatial proximity.

Distancing, pictorially indicated by the absence of interactions between the figures and by their separation on the page, can be considered the expression of every person's need for autonomy. In fact, general models of relational maturity include both “connection” and “individuation” (White, Speisman, Costos, & Smith, 1987), but this latter component has been considered only in the analysis of child–adult relationships. Examples are the balance between the attachment system and the exploration system in children who are securely attached (Bowlby, 1969), or between the growing autonomy of adolescents and their residual need for parental control and assistance (Grotevant, 1998).

Similarity is a very important feature for selecting friends, as documented in different cultural contexts (French, Jansen, Riansari, & Setiono, 2003), as it facilitates friendship formation and is then increased through repeated interaction and mutual imitation (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). During childhood, friends are typically same sex and same age, and they perceive each other as psychologically similar in terms of social behavior, attitudes, personality traits, and interests (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Burleson, 1994). In a drawing, similarity is characterized by the likeness of bodies, faces, and clothing of the figures. These pictorial cues reflect socio-demographic similarities and can also be used to express metaphorically the psychological attuning between partners.

The value of a figure can be shown by its dimension and prominent position on the page (pictorial impact), as well as by the number of its details and colors (pictorial accuracy). Comparing the value of two figures, we get two kinds of information. On the one hand, if a figure clearly prevails in value, we have an indication of the difference in importance between the depicted characters (i.e., their “authority ranking”), which is a very important feature of interpersonal relationships (Fiske, 1992). On the other hand, a balanced distribution of indices of value between the figures (e.g., more colors for a smaller figure, and fewer colors for a bigger figure) can compensate for their reduced similarity. This pictorial strategy corresponds to the approaches employed by people to mitigate interpersonal differences. These well-known social processes ensure the equity of exchanges (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) and allow each partner to maintain an adequate sense of self-worth (Tesser, 1984). A child who perceives his or her

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