



The Personality of Juvenile Offenders: Psychodynamic Aspects in Children's Apperception Test – Human Figures

Leila Salomão de la Plata Cury Tardivo¹, Maria Cecília de Vilhena Moraes²

¹Department of Clinical Psychology of Institute of Psychology, Universidade of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

²Faculty of Human Ciencias and Health, Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Email address:

tardivo@usp.br (L. S. de la P. C. Tardivo), mcvsilva@pucsp.br (M. C. de V. Moraes)

To cite this article:

Leila Salomão de la Plata Cury Tardivo, Maria Cecília de Vilhena Moraes. The Personality of Juvenile Offenders: Psychodynamic Aspects in Children's Apperception Test – Human Figures. *International Journal of Psychological and Brain Sciences*. Vol. 1, No. 1, 2016, pp. 9-12. doi: 10.11648/j.ijpbs.20160101.12

Received: May 26, 2016; **Accepted:** June 12, 2016; **Published:** June 23, 2016

Abstract: Adolescence and preadolescence can be understood by identifying impulses and defense mechanisms, as well as identification processes involved in the construction of identity. Many issues faced by youngsters derive from a devaluation of identification images: those assigned by the adolescent himself, and those offered by the family and the society. This study presents an interpretation schedule that allows the assessment of such features by means of a quantitative assessment of stories told to projective stimuli. This schedule is based on the original short form proposed by Leopold Bellak for the interpretation of thematic projective techniques, and has proven useful for comparative studies involving different clinical and control groups. A sample of two stories illustrates its use. The compatibility of such schedule with psychodynamic approaches is shown by means of a comparison of data obtained with the CAT H of 30 preadolescents, ages 10 to 12, with a history of law violation, and 70 children of a control group, with no such history or any reported psychological issues. The control group showed higher frequency of identifications with positive features, which indicates positive self-image, and higher frequency of environment seen in a positive way. The offenders' group showed an inability to identify with positive characters – usually the identification character misbehaves, is weak or impotent; the environment is often seen as threatening, thus, negative. These findings suggest negative self-image and issues in object relations of the offenders' group. The results are compatible with literature data and the theoretical approaches that support this study. These findings highlight the relevance of a reliable environment to support these children.

Keywords: Juvenile Offenders, Personality, Children's Apperception Test – Human Figures, Techniques Narratives

1. Introduction

The development of a child involves biological, psychological and social features. According to Bleger [3], a person's behavior is related to both, personality and socialization, and occurs in the mind, body and environment domains. Under a psychodynamic approach, adolescence can be understood by identifying impulses and defense mechanisms, as well as identification processes involved in the construction of identity. The role played by the individual in the society will also affect how his structure is conformed. The identification process of adolescence is related to the transition from the latency phase to the genital phase of the psychosexual development. According to Levisky [6], this transition is associated to a reorganization of the primitive

psychic apparatus and the subsequent stages of childhood.

Adolescence is seen as a vulnerable period, with many contradictions and conflicts. Aberastury [1] points out three losses the adolescent must experience: (1) the loss of the infantile body – that brings anxiety and feelings of strangeness toward the new body, and contradictory feelings of pride and shame of this new body); (2) the loss of the childhood parents (the parents image is lost; this is necessary for the individual to seek new ideals and objects from which to build his own identity); (3) the loss of the infantile status (the adolescent must abandon typically childish attitudes). Many issues faced by youngsters derive from a devaluation of identification images: those assigned by the adolescent himself, and those offered by the family and the society.

Adolescent transgressors have problems in the identity

development and are prone to antisocial conduct. Conduct disorder is a psychiatric disorder, frequent among children; it is the most frequent reason for referrals in child psychiatry, due to aggressive and antisocial behaviors. Antisocial conduct is frequent among adolescents and is a precursor of antisocial behavior of both, adolescents and adults. According to Pacheco et al [10], if no changes occur in the child's social environment, antisocial behaviors tend to persist and become more troubling from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, when it can eventually consolidate as an antisocial personality disorder.

According to Winnicott [11], antisocial conduct, a characteristic of conduct disorder, is due to problems in the emotional development of the individual. Delinquency, in Winnicott's view, can be understood as a way to deal with emotional privation, psychic conflicts, frustrations and deprivation, including emotional deprivation in the relationship with parents. Under this view, the individual resists to surrender his neurosis, understood as the transgressive behavior, since it provides him enough benefits to maintain his balance – a balance that cannot be reached through alternative means.

Winnicott [14] does not consider antisocial tendency as a diagnosis, such as neurosis or psychosis. Actually, according to his reasoning and clinical experience, *“the antisocial tendency compels the environment to be important”* (p. 503). Environment, in this context, refers to the social environment, the society. The antisocial youngster provokes (unconsciously intends that) the world of adults to take notice of his deprivation. Winnicott (*idem, ibidem*) states that the therapist's task – and of the community is a whole – when facing antisocial tendencies of their youngsters, should be conducted in terms of *“coping, tolerance and understanding”*.

The literature on the subject confirms this vision. For instance, in a study conducted by Silva and Milani [11], the content analysis of lyrics of rap songs revealed environmental failure at the origin of antisocial behavior and antisocial behavior as a hope for reparation.

Zamora [15], in a review of the latest studies on this theme, concluded that Psychology was one of the Sciences that best brought to light the multiple motivations of juvenile transgressors, since it does not reduce this phenomena to a pathological problem or a moral issue. Researches focusing the youngster profile, his relations with illegal activities, with the family and the community, besides the condition of social vulnerability, contribute to a broader understanding of the features that lead to transgressive behavior.

The ECA (acronym for child and adolescent statute, in Portuguese), enacted in Brazil, in 1990, establishes the guidelines for the assistance of juvenile offenders. It assures their rights and duties in all procedural phases. It also establishes that an offense perpetrated by an individual less than 18 years old should be called Infractional Act – a conduct with the same characteristics of a crime or law violation (contravention), but considered with lesser severity. (Mello [7]) Professionals who work with these offenders

usually find among them a poor consideration for life and high rates of idleness. Although apparently differentiating right from wrong, based on common sense, these youngsters seem compelled to follow the “bad path”, as they call it. They often report deprivations and conflictive, disorganized, neglectful family environments. (Tardivo [12]).

Some glimpse of a future is critical to consolidate an identity – the fundamental task of the adolescent (Erikson [4]), and expectations regarding the future are protection elements of development. In a study comparing adolescents living with their families, institutionalized adolescents and adolescents submitted to social-educational measures, Zappa et al [16] detected several risk factors for development in the latter two groups, that probably led to the very low expectations regarding their futures found among these youngsters.

Ajuriaguerra [2] states one can only understand adolescence by knowing the impulses, defenses, and identification processes that evolve towards a search for identity. In order to reach this knowledge, the projective techniques, particularly the thematic ones, are particularly useful.

CAT-H is a projective technique designed for children from 7 to approximately 13 years old. It consists of 10 pictures displaying social contexts associated to situations of special concern to children and adolescents. It is similar to CAT-A, but presents stimuli with human characters instead of animals. The child is required to tell a story for each of the cards. According to the projective hypothesis, these stories will reflect, in a latent level, the conflicts, identities, roles, family structures and interpersonal interactions of the examinee. Hence, it is perfectly suitable to explore the features pointed out by Ajuriaguerra to understand adolescence and preadolescence.

2. Objective

This paper aims to present an interpretation schedule to be used with thematic techniques, particularly Leopold Bellak's CAT series. It presents a scoring system compatible with a psychodynamic personality assessment that allows for group comparison and quantitative research.

3. Method

The proposed scoring system is based on the original short form proposed by Leopold Bellak for the interpretation of thematic projective techniques, which has proven useful for comparative studies involving different clinical and control groups (MIGUEL et col [8]; ORCHIUCCI et col, [9]). It provides an appraisal of the main psychological weaknesses and strengths of any given individual.

Eight variables are assessed, receiving a positive score (+1), a negative score (-1) or a zero score, depending on their ability to promote (+1) or deter (-1) health and development; a zero score is attributed in case of insufficient data (usually observed in descriptive or very poor stories). The assessed

variables are:

- Self-image,
- Object relations,
- Environment perceived as,
- Needs and conflicts,
- Anxieties,
- Defense mechanisms,

- Superego,
- Ego integration

A ninth score is obtained with the sum of the scores of the eight previous variables, composing the *Total positive/ Total negative* score. Table 1 shows the record sheet used for scoring each story told by the subject.

Table 1. Record form for evaluating each story told to the CAT-H.

POSITIVE SCORES	NEGATIVE SCORES
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-image: main character has positive attributes.	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-image: main character has negative attributes.
<input type="checkbox"/> Object relations: positive.	<input type="checkbox"/> Object relations: negative.
<input type="checkbox"/> Environment perceived as: positive	<input type="checkbox"/> Environment perceived as: negative
<input type="checkbox"/> Needs and conflicts: expressed in an organized speech.	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs and conflicts: not expressed or expressed in a very intense way.
<input type="checkbox"/> Anxieties: foster growth, autonomy, problem solving.	<input type="checkbox"/> Anxieties: involve fear of loss of love, disapproval, abandonment, lack of support.
<input type="checkbox"/> Defense mechanisms: show ability to deal with internal or external stimuli (adaptive mechanisms).	<input type="checkbox"/> Defense mechanisms: show inadequacy in dealing with internal or external stimuli (phobic or dissociative mechanisms).
<input type="checkbox"/> Superego: adequate.	<input type="checkbox"/> Superego: rigid, weak or nonexistent.
Ego integration: positive self-perception in the plot, adequate problem solving.	<input type="checkbox"/> Ego integration: negative self-perception in the plot, unable to solve problems.
Total positive scores:	Total negative scores:

Below, is shown a sample of two stories from a 9-year-old boy analyzed with the proposed scoring system. This boy has a history of physical punishments inflicted by his parents, and has been presenting serious behavior issues.

Card 4: Once upon a time, there was a very sad boy. He never did things right because his mother didn't care about him. Then, one day, a genie appeared and said to him: 'If you remain sad, your life will never have a future'. So his mother said.... He said to his mother: 'Mother, do care about me, so I

can have a future'. And his mother had a baby that was going to be his brother. So, he was never sad again in his life. The end!

Card 10: Once upon a time, there was a mother who did not love her son. And she was haunted by her deceased son. And he had a name, but no one dared to say this name. Otherwise, he appears. [What happens next?] He died because his mother didn't love him.... she abused him. So, he haunted his mother until she died

Table 2. Positive (P) and negative (N) scores of stories told to cards 9 and 10 by a 9 year old boy.

CATEGORIES	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9		10		TOTAL	
	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	P	N
Self image	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	3	6
Object relations	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	3	7
Environment	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	5
Needs and Conflicts	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	8
Anxieties	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	8
Defenses mechanisms	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	2	8
Superego	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	4
Ego integration	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	8
Total	2	4	7	1	8	0	0	7	2	5	0	7	0	8	2	6	0	8	0	8	20	54

A study with juvenile offenders, conducted in Sao Paulo Brazil, using the Children Apperception Test – Human figures (CAT-H) illustrates the usefulness of the scheme and its accordance with psychodynamic theories of personality. In this study, CAT-H was administered to two groups of pre-adolescents, ages 10 to 12: an offender's group, with 30 subjects with history of law violation; and a control group, with 70 subjects with no such history.

4. Results

A comparison of the two groups showed more identifications with positive features (pretty, brave, competent, adequate) in the control group, which indicate positive self-image. In this group, the environment is more frequently seen in a positive way. Other characters in the plot

are seen as accepting, understanding, affective, providing adequate controls and having positive expectations. When they feel vulnerable, children of the control group look for support in the environment, expecting to obtain the protection they need.

On the other hand, in the offenders' group one can find an inability to identify with positive characters. Usually the identification character misbehaves, is weak or impotent, features that indicate negative self-image. Other characters ignore the identification character or refuse to help him when required to do so. This suggests issues in object relations. The environment is generally considered threatening, thus, negative. When they feel vulnerable, children of the transgressor group also look for support in the environment, but usually don't have the expectation that they will obtain the protection they need. With the lack of environmental

support, these youngsters can become paralyzed or dominated by dismay, which indicate poor ego integration. These results match the theoretical approaches that support this study and highlight the relevance of a reliable environment to support these children.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to demonstrate the usefulness of an interpretation schedule for thematic techniques that, due to its quantitative approach, allows for comparison among groups or individuals. Based on Bellak's short form for the interpretation of apperception techniques, the schedule is coherent with a psychodynamic approach. The use of the schedule was illustrated comparing a juvenile transgressors group and a control group. It revealed the predominance of negative self-image, issues in object relations and negative environment perception in the transgressors group, as opposed to positive self-image, sound object relations and positive environment perception in the control group. The system can also be useful in clinical contexts, allowing for an idiosyncratic approach.

As Jenkins [5] puts it, the development of systematic scoring systems can help to narrow the gap between science and practice, but it requires adaptation on both sides. This study, as others developed by Miguel et col [8] and Orchiucci et col [9], are evidences of the usefulness of the proposed schedule to narrow this gap.

References

- [1] Aberastury, A. (1971). *Adolescência*. Porto Alegre, Artes Médicas.
- [2] Ajuriaguerra, J. (1985) *Manual de Psiquiatria Infantil*, Rio de Janeiro, Masson do Brasil.
- [3] Bleger, J. (1975) *Psicologia de la Conducta*, Buenos Aires Editorial Paidós.
- [4] Erikson, E. H. (1994). *Identity: Youth and crisis* (No. 7). WW Norton & Company.
- [5] Jenkins, S. R. Ed (2008) - *A handbook of clinical scoring systems for thematic apperceptive techniques*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.
- [6] Levisky, D. L. Org (1998). *Adolescência e violência: ações comunitárias na prevenção: conhecendo, articulando, integrando e multiplicando*. São Paulo, Casa do Psicólogo.
- [7] Mello, A. C. C. (1997) O que é ato infracional? In MELLO, A. C. C. - *O jovem e seus direitos*. pp. 122-131. São Paulo: Editora Moderna.
- [8] Miguel, Adele; Tardivo, Leila S. L. P. C.; Silva, Maria Cecília V. M.; Tosi, Silésia M. V. D. (2010) *CAT-A: Teste de apercepção infantil: figuras de animais*. Leopold Bellak e David M. Abrams; - São Paulo: Vetor (Coleção CAT-A; v. 1).
- [9] Orchiucci, P.; Cury Tardivo, L & Salcedo Barrientos, D. (2015) - psychosocial vulnerability in pregnant adolescents victims of domestic violence. IN, *European Child Adolescent Psychiatry* 24, *Supplement*, edited by Programme Committee chaired by Ruud Midera, Josefina Castro- Fornieles and Stepan Eliez. S. 25.
- [10] Pacheco J, A. P.; Reppold C.; Piccinini C. A.; Hutz, C. S. (2013) Stability of antisocial behavior on the infancy-adolescence transition: a developmental perspective.
- [11] Silva, C. Y. G.; Milani, R. G. (2015) Adolescence and an Antisocial Tendency: Rap as an Expression of Emotional Deprivation. *Psicol. cienc. prof.* vol. 35 no. 2 Brasília Apr./June 2015
- [12] Tardivo, L. S. P. C. (2007). *O adolescente e sofrimento emocional nos dias de hoje: reflexões psicológicas - encontros e viagens*. e São Paulo. Vetor.
- [13] Winnicott, D. D. (1987) *Privação e delinquência*. Trad. de Álvaro Cabral. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- [14] Winnicott, D. W (1978) *Textos Selecionados Da Pediatria à Psicanálise* Rio de Janeiro, Francisco Alves.
- [15] Zamora, M. H. (2008) Adolescentes em conflito com a lei: um breve exame da produção recente em psicologia. *Revista Eletrônica Polêmica*. Rio de Janeiro: Labore.
- [16] Zappe, J. G.; Moura Jr., J. F.; Dell'Aglio, D. D.; Sarriera, J. C. (2013) Expectations of adolescents in different contexts regarding the future. *Act. Colom. Psicol.* vol. 16 no. 1 Bogotá Jan./June 2013