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EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN LATE CHILDHOOD: INTERACTION BETWEEN SOCIO-RELATIONAL AND SELF-REGULATION FACTORS IN PUPILS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL

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E' un dato acquisito la correlazione esistente tra la capacità di controllare e valutare gli esiti del proprio comportamento e la possibilità di co-regolarlo in situazioni di interazione sociale (Saarni, 1999, 2004; Thompson, 1988). Finalità del presente studio è analizzare come i fattori di tipo autoregolativo medino variabili di ordine socio-relazionale in bambini di età scolare, con riferimento alla valutazione dei personali legami di amicizia e di amicizia intima. La ricerca coinvolge 94 partecipanti (49 maschi, 45 femmine); range età anagrafica: 8,03 - 11,00; media: 8,9; ds: 0,7. Lo scopo è verificare le correlazioni esistenti tra variabili di ordine autoregolativo, riferite al comportamento scolastico, e variabili di ordine socio-relazionale, relative alla qualità attribuita al legame amicale e al legame di amicizia intima L'analisi delle componenti socio-relazionali è stata condotta con l'applicazione delle scale di autovalutazione multidimensionale FQS (Bukowski & al., 1994) e IFS (Sharabany, 1994); per la valutazione delle componenti autoregolative è stata applicata la griglia di osservazione "Aspetti sociali ed atteggiamenti autoregolativi" tratta dalla batteria di test Q1 VATA (De Beni R., et al., 2005). I risultati ottenuti evidenziano correlazioni significative (p < .05; p < .01) tra specifiche componenti autoregolative e particolari dimensioni del legame di amicizia intima.
Parole chiave: self-regulation, intimate friendship, social behaviour

Available data show the correlation between the ability to control and assess the outcomes of one's behaviour and the possibility (Saarni, 1999, 2004; Thompson, 1988) of co-regulating it in social interaction situations. The aim of this study is to analyse how self-regulation factors can mediate variables of a socio-relational nature in school-age children, with reference to the way in which they assess friendship and intimate friendship bonds. The study involved 94 participants (49 male, 45 female); age group range: 8.03 – 11.00 years; average: 8.9; sd: 0.7. The aim was to examine the correlation between self-regulation variables, with reference to school behaviour, and socio-relation-

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al variables, with respect to the quality attributed to friendship bonds and to intimate friendship. The analysis of socio-relational components was conducted using the multi-dimensional self-assessment FQS (Bukowski & al., 1994) and IFS (Sharabany, 1994); the self-regulation behavioural components were assessed using the observation check-list "Social aspects and self-regulation attitudes" from the test battery Q1 VATA (De Beni R., et al., 2005). The results obtained show significant correlations ($p < .05$; $p < .01$) between specific components underlying self-regulation in school behaviour and specific dimensions of the intimate friendship bond.

Keywords: self-regulation, intimate friendship, social behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The possibility of establishing positive social relations is an important protective factor for a child's development (Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998). As a matter of fact, it is within the framework of satisfactory peer relations that the child is able to elaborate a coherent sense of self, thus accruing awareness with respect to his/her characteristics, both positive and negative. From a socio-relational viewpoint, development is characterised by a gradual extension of the references with which the child is confronted: from the limited range of family interactions, which are typical of the development setting during early childhood, the child then learns to approach increasingly large and complex social situations, including the classroom-group, peers, life outside school. The expression and consolidation of personal abilities with which such development tasks are approached, therefore, represent an essential adaptation factor in terms of individual development; they also play a protective role against the risk of developing psychopathological problems (Sroufe, & Rutter, 1984). More specifically, the interaction with the peer group – for a child – constitutes a fundamental development step, both from a socio-cultural viewpoint, and from a relational perspective. This is because, on the one hand, it allows for the first cultural socialisation processes, resulting in what has been described by Corsaro (1985) as "children's culture"; on the other side it paves the way for the establishment of the first friendship bonds. The latter have been analysed by developmental psychology with specific reference to three different perspectives: first of all, there is a *socio-cultural* trend, pursued by those authors (Cole, 1996; Bruner, 1990; Rogoff, 1990) who, based on the theory of activity (Leont'ev, 1977), consider social interactions as essential contexts for the co-elaboration of cultural meanings. Friendship between children, in this respect, is analysed as a function of the cognitive and symbolic interchanges which it makes possible, leading to the creation of actually shared and participated own local cultures. A second approach (Sullivan, 1953), on the other hand, underlines the important protective value exercised by being able, during childhood and adolescence, to establish satisfactory friendship relations: particular relevance is attributed here to the associations found between the quality of peer relations (acceptance vs. rejection) established during childhood or adolescence, and the development, as adults, of psychopathological and adjustment problems. The third perspective, finally, is of an *interactionist* nature (Sherif, 1967); the importance of peer relations is stressed as a fundamental development micro-context, which allows children to develop and perfect the ability to understand others and get to know themselves.

A relevant role, as part of the child's ability to coordinate and regulate a positive relationship with his/her peers, is played by the possibility of controlling and assessing the outcomes of his/her behaviour and, whenever it becomes necessary, to change it (Scherer, 1988; Saarni, 1999, 2004; Thompson, 1988; Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). Through the activation of cognitive and meta-cognitive control processes it thus becomes possible to regulate behaviours which are potentially dysfunctional from an emotional and socio-relational viewpoint. For the purposes of this paper, self-regulation is defined as the ability to understand, monitor and govern one's actions and cognitive skills in an adaptive manner with regard to the specific features of the development context (Bodrova and Leong, 2006). The concept

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of self-regulation, in fact, is closely related to self-control and responsibility in respect of one's behaviour (Mowat, 2010): it is activated thanks to the interaction between cognitive, meta-cognitive factors, referring to self-efficacy, and to the beliefs accrued by the subject with regard to his/her characteristics from the viewpoint of volition, motivation and socio-relational skills. In this respect, Zimmerman (2008) identifies self-regulation as a function of the level on which pupils appear to be actively involved in the learning process from a meta-cognitive, motivational and behavioural perspective. Self-regulation is therefore a concept which seems to relate to the broader idea of "self-control" (Baumeister &Vohs, 2007), and which, in a school setting, is being carefully evaluated due to the implications pertaining to the possibility of maintaining control over discipline. There seems to be, therefore, an apparent general consensus in including among the objects of self regulation thinking, both aspects and processes of an attentive nature. From this perspective, self-regulation is characterised (Rueda, Posner, & Rothbart, 2007) as a function of motivational, cognitive, social and attentive aspects, thus playing a substantial role also as regards the child's ability to effectively integrate within a peer group. The conclusion, therefore, is that self-regulation plays a mediation role in the child's ability to establish positive peer relations. The need therefore arises to clarify in what way such skills are expressed.

This study starts from the assumptions, widely confirmed in literature, that relational skills and self-adjustment are important components, on which a successful emotional and social development is founded. As a matter of fact, such skills are regarded as clear protection factors against the emerging of psychological and adjustment problems: in other words, higher levels of social competence and self-regulation skills seem to correlate with a greater likelihood of establishing satisfactory personal relations, and to integrate effectively within the relevant context.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

This study analysed the ways in which relational and self-regulation variables are expressed in a group of subjects with typical development. The research specifically pursues the following objectives: i) exploring the self-regulation skills in children of school age with typical development; ii) exploring how the quality attributed to the friendship bond is perceived by children of school age with typical development; iii) exploring how the quality attributed to the intimate friendship bond is perceived by children of school age with typical development; iv) verifying whether there are significant correlations between the level of self-regulation skills observed and the quality attributed to individual friendship bonds; v) verifying whether there are significant correlations between the level of self-regulation skills observed and the quality attributed to intimate friendship bonds. With regard to such objectives, the starting point of the research is the measurement of self-regulation and social skills in line with the standard national average, and to measure significant correlations between self-regulation skills and the friendship bond perception.

Sample

The research involved 94 participants with typical development, of which 49 male, 45 female (age group range: 8.03 – 11.00; average: 8.9; sd: 0.7), attending the second primary school cycle. All the participants come from state schools in the north-west of Italy.

Instruments
FQS

The FQS (Bukowski & al., 1994) questionnaire, translated into Italian for the purposes of this study (Fonzi, Tani & Schneider, 1996) is a self-report instrument which measures the perception of

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quality characteristics most effectively representing the bond established with one's best friend. It consists of 22 items, with the possibility of expressing individual agreement according to a Likert scale on 5 levels, and it assesses five specific dimensions of the friendship bond:

1. Companionship: with reference to the time spent together;

2. Help: in respect of mutual assistance and protection against any unfairness or oppression situations;

3. Security: with reference, on the one hand, to trust in the support which a friend can offer and, on the other side, to the certainty that the friendship bond is in any case sufficiently resistant to withstand possible adversities;

4. Closeness: with reference to the affection felt for the friendship bond, to the strength attributed tot the latter, to the attachment developed for the friend;

5. Conflict: with reference to the frequency with which conflict situations affect the friendship bond.

To begin with, the respondents are asked to think about the friend they consider most important, and to answer with reference to what that person means to them. The coding of the answers allows for the elaboration of a score with reference to the scale as a whole and to specific sub-scales, obtained by adding up the values attributed to the individual items (in their entirety and in relation to the individual sub-scales).

IFS

The IFS questionnaire adopted, for the purposes of this study in the Italian version by Tani, Maggino (2003), is a self-report instrument whose aim is to assess how the quality characteristics of the intimate friendship bond are perceived. Therefore it is structured as a self-assessment multidimensional scale providing a description of the connotations acquired by intimate friendship bonds during childhood and adolescence. In its original format, Sharabany (1994) presents a definition of the concept of friendship which is multi-componential and hierarchical, allowing for the measurement of a global score and of specific partial scores, for each dimension, for each dimension (eight in total) which describe the concept under examination. It consists of 32 items, in respect of which the respondent is free to express agreement with reference to a Likert scale on 7 levels. The dimensions studied are:

1. Frankness and spontaneity: in respect of the point to which the child feels it is possible to "unveil" him/herself to the friend, in relation to his/her both positive and negative characteristics, and to truthfully criticise the friend;

2. Sensitivity and Knowing: associated with the possibility of mutual understanding, also through empathy and not only through knowledge;

3. Attachment: with reference to the type of connection which describes the individual friendship bond and which is expressed through a specific feeling of union and, vice-versa, of missing the friend when he/she is not there;

4. Exclusiveness: this refers to the special features attributed to the intimate friendship bond which is not used to describe any other kind of relationship;

5. Giving and sharing: considers the possibility of spending time with the friend and the willingness to share also concrete objects and assets;

6. Imposition: it refers to the level of openness and promptness in asking for the friend's help;

7. Common Activities: relates to the wish and pleasure in making experiences with the friend;

8. Trust and Loyalty: describes the possibility of confiding in the friend also intimate secrets without fear of being betrayed.

Before answering the questions in the test, the children were asked to identify a specific friendship situation as a reference, and to complete the questionnaire always with regard to the latter. The scores were processed by calculating the arithmetical average, on the total and on the items which make up the individual subscales.

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Q1 VATA

The Q1 VATA battery (De Beni R., con Zamperlin C., Friso G., Molin A., Poli S., Vocetti C., 2005, Giunti O. S., Florence) presents a set of tools created with a view to assessing transversal skills in learning processes. It was originally designed as a procedure useful for the preventive assessment of learning difficulties possibly encountered when studying a child in the routine school setting. More specifically, for this paper the Observation Grid of Social Aspects and Behavioural Self-Regulation Attitudes was used, a tool for the assessment by others of social and self-regulation skills typical of child behaviour (8-11 years). The observer (the reference teacher) expresses agreement based on a three-point Likert scale ("extremely adequate", "fairly adequate", "not very adequate") with regard to the contents in 44 items. The grid is divided into two sections: the first one, including 20 items, assesses the social aspects, while the second, consisting of 24 items, concerns self-regulation aspects pertaining to school life. The coding generates, for each dimension specifically analysed, a raw score which is then compared with sampling standards, thus allowing to position the child on the relevant level ("insufficient", "adequate", "good"). The social aspects are assessed with reference to five specific dimensions: *interpersonal relations, respect of self and others*, *adaptability, involvement, reliability and responsibility*. The self-regulation skills, on the other hand, are assessed according to the following dimensions: *effort*, *attention*, *organization, autonomy, motivation, control*. The values considered here will be those related to Self-Regulation Attitudes.

Procedure

The data were collected, as part of effective collaboration activities with the various local schools involved (in the north-west of Italy), between the 1st of September, 2010 and the 30th of June, 2011. The data from the corpus were then processed using the statistical analysis software SPSS (version 18.0).

Results

Table 1 shows the absence of statistically significant correlations between the variables referring to the quality attributed to the friendship bond and to self-regulation behaviour indices. The self-regulation skills observed in the classroom, therefore, do not seem to correlate with the accrued perception of individual friendship bonds.

Table 1: FQS/Q1 VATA – Self-regulation skill correlations (Pearson's r)

		FQS *Companionship*	FQS *Help*	FQS *Security*	FQS *Closeness*	FQS Conflict	FQS Total
Q1V Effort	Correlazione di Pearson	-,005	,058	,018	,050	-,018	,025
	Sig. (2-code)	,964	,577	,861	,633	,860	,810
	N	94	94	94	94	94	94
Q1V Attention	Correlazione di Pearson	,070	,033	,051	-,047	-,007	,010
	Sig. (2-code)	,505	,755	,623	,655	,944	,921
	N	94	94	94	94	94	94
Q1V Organization	Correlazione di Pearson	,060	-,044	-,183	,035	,115	,094
	Sig. (2-code)	,567	,671	,077	,741	,269	,367
	N	94	94	94	94	94	94

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Q1V Autonomy	Correlazione di Pearson	-,177	-,108	-,159	-,124	,138	,002
	Sig. (2-code)	,090	,301	,127	,235	,188	,988
	N	93	93	93	93	93	93
Q1V Motivation	Correlazione di Pearson	,007	-,071	-,155	,014	,114	,071
	Sig. (2-code)	,947	,498	,137	,893	,275	,496
	N	94	94	94	94	94	94
Q1V Control	Correlazione di Pearson	-,127	,030	-,131	-,143	,142	,040
	Sig. (2-code)	,221	,775	,209	,169	,173	,701
	N	94	94	94	94	94	94

Table 2, on the other hand, shows some interesting results: several correlations were actually observed between some behaviour self-regulation components and specific dimensions referring to the intimate friendship bond. More specifically, the organisation seems inversely correlated with the second dimension on the IFS (*Sensitivity and knowledge of the other*), as regards the possibility of getting to know each other also in an emphatic and intuitive manner. *Organization*, assessed by Q1 VATA as part of self-regulation skills, on the other hand, identifies the ability to design and manage the assignment execution, also in view of the time available. Reference is made here to the ability to regulate one's behaviour in an effective way and to plan it in order to comply with the deadlines given. This is a skill which underlies the possibility of succeeding in classroom and individual assignments in the general sense of the term. A tendency to more effi-cient organisation, therefore, seems to be accompanied by being less prone to understanding the other emphatically, beyond the mutual exchange of information. On the other hand, a greater propensity to attributing much importance to intimate friendship aspects more related to spon-taneity and to individual affection feelings, seems to be correlated with a more limited capacity to manage in an organised and functional way the deadlines for school and individual assignments. Moreover, table 2 shows significant correlations between the self-regulation skill of *Autonomy* and the second and fourth dimension studied by the IFS (respectively: *Sensitivity and knowledge of the other* and *Exclusiveness in the relationship*), and also with the scale as a whole. *Autonomy* is described here as the ability to organise work individually, without relying on support or confir-mation from others, and with the possibility of placing success in completing the assignment before one's needs. The independent child does not consider gratification dependant on praise received from others, and carefully weighs up any decision to be taken if requests for a change are made. The correlations all point in a negative direction: higher autonomy levels are associated with less importance attached to the intimate friendship bond quality as a whole, as well as with regard to the aspects more focused on mutual emphatic knowledge (*Sensitivity and knowledge of the other*) and on the uniqueness of the intimate bond (*Exclusiveness in the relationship*). The second dimension analysed by the IFS appears to be correlated with another self-regulation behaviour index: motivation. The willingness to get to know a friend on an intuitive, affection-based and not strictly rational level is correlated, once again in an inversely proportional manner, with the ability to detect, within classroom activities, reasons to be confident in the possibility of succeeding. Reference is made here to both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as to the confidence itself with which the child considers his/her skills, as an incentive to strive towards a successful outcome.

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Table 2: IFS/Q1VATA – Self-regulation skill correlations (Pearson's r)

		IFS Frankness and spontaneity	IFS Sensitivity and Knowing	IFS Attachment	IFS Exclusiveness	IFS Giving and sharing	IFS Imposition	IFS Common Activities	IFS Trust and Loyalty	IFS Total
Q1V Effort	Correlazione di Pearson	,034	,020	-,078	-,178	-,084	-,025	-,025	-,109	-,114
	Sig. (2-code)	,747	,851	,454	,086	,419	,808	,808	,295	,275
Q1V Attention	Correlazione di Pearson	,140	-,041	,047	-,172	-,062	,095	,095	,087	,025
	Sig. (2-code)	,180	,693	,651	,098	,554	,362	,362	,403	,809
Q1V Organization	Correlazione di Pearson	-,094	-,244[*]	-,009	-,166	-,202	,021	,021	-,101	-,177
	Sig. (2-code)	,366	,018	,932	,111	,051	,840	,840	,334	,087
Q1V Autonomy	Correlazione di Pearson	-,155	-,233[*]	-,184	-,346[**]	-,171	-,110	-,110	-,198	-,308[**]
	Sig. (2-code)	,137	,025	,077	,001	,101	,296	,296	,057	,003
Q1V Motivation	Correlazione di Pearson	-,086	-,266[**]	,035	-,089	-,081	-,025	-,025	-,118	-,157
	Sig. (2-code)	,412	,010	,741	,395	,438	,809	,809	,258	,131
Q1V Control	Correlazione di Pearson	-,102	-,064	-,078	-,166	-,072	-,077	-,077	-,192	-,196
	Sig. (2-code)	,327	,540	,454	,110	,490	,462	,462	,063	,058

* p < .05

** p < .01

DISCUSSIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The results presented here call for a specific reflection about the mutual influence between self-regulation components and the way in which friendship bonds are perceived. In fact, starting from the assumption – widely confirmed in the literature on the subject – that there is a deep and reciprocal connection between the child's self-regulation behaviour (assessed here with reference to the school setting) and the socio-relational development dimension, the original question was aimed at analysing in depth this interrelation's specific characteristics, especially as a function of friendship bonds. In this respect it is interesting to note that there seems to be no generic and homogeneous correlation between the two levels of variables; on the contrary the results point to the existence of correlations between some components which define the self-regulation behaviour (more specifically: organization, autonomy, motivation) and the quality attributed to specific aspects of the intimate friendship bonds. As a matter of fact, such self-regulation components seem to be related – as already mentioned – in an inversely proportional matter, to the importance attached by the child exactly to those intimate friendship elements which characterise its unique, exclusive and emotional involvement nature. The self-regulation variables which more than others refer to an effective control and confidence with regard to individual task management skills, therefore, appear to act as factors inhibiting greater investment in those characteristics which, in intimate friendship, imply being more prone to establish contacts with others by means of empathy, considering the bond in question as a unique relation in its kind. Therefore, it is not the friendship bond in generic terms which is affected by effective self-regulation as regards school behaviour (this conclusion is apparently confirmed by the absence of significant correlations between FQS and Q1 VATA values), but rather the friendship

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relation which takes on an intimate connotation, of extreme closeness and emotional-affection consonance. In this respect it is worth mentioning the correlation observed (significant for $p < .01$) between independent behaviour and the global IFS score: greater efficiency in terms of completing assignments in an independent manner without being controlled or judged, in other words, is accompanies by greater importance attached, as a whole, to the ways in which the intimate friendship bond is expressed.

This kind of results raises an important question: is behavioural self-regulation necessarily a positive capability for an individual? Therefore, in line with the questions raised by a few recent studies (Khon, 2008), the results presented in this paper call for a reflection about an aspect which is usually taken for granted, i.e. that self-regulation in itself is a protective development factor. By adopting a socio-constructivist perspective (Mowat, 2010), it is then possible to analyse behavioural self-regulation also as a function of adjusting one's attitude to other people's needs, thus producing effective pro-social performances. In this respect this begs a further question, which has a broader scope: what should the educational activity be aimed at, when it is especially aimed at consolidating socio-relational attitudes? Could it possibly be a way of de-strengthening (or re-setting) associated meta-cognitive factors?

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