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The Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY) and its Adaptation for Brazilian children and adolescents

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Abstract

The present study reports the psychometrics properties of the adaptation of the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY) to a Brazilian sample. The MESSY and the Family Identification Test (FIT) were completed by 382 children (215 females, 167 males) from urban middle-class areas and *favelas* (slums) of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, from 7 to 15 years ($M=10.30$; $SD=2.24$). Results from factor analysis yielded a four-factor model with good internal consistency. One-Way Anova analyzes described boys as having higher scores on Factor 1 than girls (*Aggressiveness/Antisociality*). Children from urban middle-class areas performed better on factor 2 (*Social Skills/Assertiveness*) than those from *favelas*. Socio-cultural implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: Children (Brazil); adolescents; social skills.

Escala Matson de Avaliação das Habilidades Sociais para Jovens (MESSY) e sua Adaptação para Crianças e Adolescentes Brasileiros

Resumo

O presente estudo descreve as propriedades psicométricas da adaptação da *Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters* (MESSY) para uma amostra brasileira. A MESSY e o Teste de Identificação Familiar (FIT) foram completados por 382 crianças (215 meninas, 167 meninos) de áreas urbanas de classe média e favelas de Belo Horizonte, Brasil, variou de 7 a 15 anos ($M=10.30$; $DP=2.24$). Resultados da análise fatorial produziram um modelo com quatro fatores com boa consistência interna. Análises de Variância *One-Way* mostraram que os meninos possuem escores superiores do que as meninas (*Agressividade/Comportamento Anti-social*). Crianças provenientes de áreas urbanas de classe média apresentaram uma melhor performance no fator 2 (*Habilidades Sociais/Assertividade*) do que aqueles das *favelas*. Implicações culturais dos resultados são discutidas.

Palavras-chave: Crianças (Brasil); adolescentes; habilidades sociais.

Social skills are a fundamental factor for the formation of relationships, for the quality of social interactions and even for the individual's mental health (Hay, 1994; Parker & Asher, 1987). Such skills can be defined as the complete pattern of behaviors showed by an individual during his/her interpersonal relations. In this sense, adaptive social behavior is a complex

from others (parents, teachers, etc.) about social skills (e.g. "son likes to play with other boys") or self-report (e.g. I like to play with other boys.). A self-report scale was used to measure social skills. The Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY) developed by Matson, Rotatori and H

which factorial structure best explains the data because the results of former studies showed a different number of factors and different arrangements of items.

Thus, the objectives of the present study are to examine the psychometric properties of the MESSY for the first time in Latin America, i.e. in a Brazilian sample and to compare the results to foregoing studies with the MESSY in other socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, it will investigate the differences of social skills in children from urban middle-class areas and *favelas* (slums).

Materials and Methods

Sample

The sample included 382 children (215 females, 167 males) from four public schools in urban middle-class areas of Belo Horizonte, the third largest city in Brazil (3.5 million). 234 children were from schools A and B, located in urban middle-class areas (96 males and 138 females), and 148 children were from schools B and C, sited in so-called *favelas* (71 males and 77 females). Age ranged from 7 to 15 years ($M=10.30$; $SD=2.24$). The demographic composition of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Instruments

The *Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters* (MESSY) is a self-report measure developed by Matson, Rotatori and Helsel (1983). The scale consists of 62 items, which are rated by the child or adolescent according to a five-point Likert scale. The items are related to 6 factors/dimensions originally named 'Appropriate Social Skill', 'Inappropriate Assertiveness', 'Impulsive/Recalcitrant', 'Overconfident', 'Jealousy/Withdrawal' and 'Miscellaneous Items' (rest of the items difficult to classify).

The MESSY was translated into Portuguese by three native speakers. Subsequently this version was modified by two other Brazilians in order to achieve a better understanding by persons with lower levels of formal education, while at the same time, retaining the original meaning of the items.

The *Family Identification Test* (FIT; Remschmidt & Mattejat, 1999) is an instrument that was developed in Germany for the assessment of self-congruence ('I am how I would like

anxious, moody, nervous, content, calm, lively, understanding, respectful, friendly) derived from five personality concepts: 'Social Activity', 'Assertiveness', 'Resonance' and 'Emotional Stability/Lability'. The child has to describe him/herself (real self), how he/she wants to be (ideal self), and subsequently the self in a closer social context characterized as 'significant others': his/her parents, a best friend of him/her and him/herself. Each item has to be evaluated in reference to the real self, along to a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all corresponding) to five (completely corresponding) correlations between the real and ideal self, indicating congruence. The identification patterns are calculated through the correlation between the desired self, the person and the real self (real identification). Previous studies with the FIT had shown its ability to discriminate clinical from non-clinical populations (Teodoro, 1998) as well as its successful adaptation to Portuguese (Teodoro, 2000).

Procedure

After contacting the schools the authors provided the background of the study to the teachers. The students were informed about the project and signed a confirmation letter, which had to be signed by the parents.

The children, who were authorized to participate in the study, completed the self-report version of the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY) and the Family System Test (FIT) individually, with one of the authors who was ready to answer any question of any doubt.

Results

In the current study, as the first step of the exploratory factorial analysis was conducted, we determined the most appropriate dimensional structure for the data set. Next, the model found was submitted to a confirmatory factorial analysis based on its covariance matrix to an analysis of internal consistence. The results were compared with personality identification patterns obtained using the

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was performed using the principal components method (PCA) and Oblimin rotation with the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS 8®). As the most widely used criterion to determine the number of factors the scree plot method was chosen (Cattell, 1966).

The items and their loadings, and the variance explained by each factor are shown in Table 2. The result of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .827, indicating appropriateness of the factor analysis.

The initial results suggested a four factor solution that explained 29.7% of the total variance. A set of six items showed saturation lower than .30 (Item 08 and 62 from the first factor, Item 01 and 58 from the second factor and items 10 and 54 from the fourth factor). Nevertheless these items were maintained in the model in order to retain the possibility for international comparison.

The first factor explained 13.6% of the variance and was named 'Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior'. The second factor, 'Social Skills/Assertiveness', explained 13.5% of the variance. The third factor, 'Conceit/Hubris', explained 3.5% of the variance and the last factor, 'Social Anxiety' explained another 3.2%.

Correlations Among the MESSY Factors

The correlations among the four factors are shown in Table 3. There are three significant correlations of $p < .01$: between factors 1 and 3 ($r = .36$); between factors 3 and 4 ($r = .36$); and between factors 2 and 4 ($r = .12$; $p < .05$). The other possible associations were not correlated. The correlation between factor 2 with factor 1 and with factor 3 was not significant.

Table 2

Items of the MESSY and their Distribution to Factors after Oblimin Rotation

Items	1	2	3	4
Factor 1: <i>Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior</i>				
41. I speak too loudly.	.656			
35. I am stubborn.	.618			
30. I make fun of others.	.607			
06. I speak (interrupt) when someone else is speaking.	.593			
53. I get into fights a lot.	.586			
22. I pick on people to make them angry.	.570	-.203		
07. I take or use things that are not mine without permission.	.558			
11. I slap or hit when I am angry.	.522			
39. I make sounds that bother others (burping, sniffing).	.508			
21. I lie to get something I want.	.502			
17. I pick out other children's faults/mistakes.	.491			
02. I threaten people or act like a bully.	.478			
05. I gripe or complain often.	.445			
14. I give others children dirty looks.	.444			
38. I think that people are picking on me when they are not.	.435			
04. I am bossy (tell people what to do instead of asking).	.428			
19. I break promises.	.413			
29. I hurt others' feelings on purpose (I try to make people sad).	.398			
61. I hurt others when teasing them.	.378			
03. I become angry easy.	.316			
62. I want to get even with someone who hurts me.	.289			

Table 2.

*Items of the MESSY and their Distribution to Factors after Oblimin Rotation (continuation)*ARTICULOS
242

Items	Factors		
	1	2	3
28. I know how to make friends.		.458	-.225
16. I feel happy when someone else does well.		.453	
46. I ask questions when talking with others.		.450	
50. I feel sorry when I hurt someone.		.444	
20. I tell people they are look.		.437	
23. I walk up to people and start a conversation.	.230	.434	
47. I see my friends often.		.422	
42. I call people by their names.	-.229	.402	
40. I take care of other's property as if it were my own.		.388	
37. I show my feelings.		.387	
27. I keep secrets well.		.361	
52. I join in games with others children.		.333	.243
09. I look at people when I talk with them.		.322	
58. I explain things more than I need to.		.262	
01. I make other people laugh.		.257	
Factor 3: <i>Conceit/Haughtiness</i>			
45. I try to be better to every one.			.639
60. I think that winning is everything.			.634
33. I think I know it all.			.601
18. I always want to be the first.			.578
51. I like to be the leader.			.536
15. I feel angry or jealous when someone else does well.			.505
36. I act like I am better than other people.	.348		.454
57. I stay with the others too long (wear out ma welcome).			.336
Factor 4: <i>Loneliness/Social Anxiety</i>			
49. I feel lonely.			
48. I play alone.			.206
25. I like to be alone.			
26. I am afraid to speak to people.	.258		
10. I have many friends.		.276	
54. I am jealous of the others people.	.251		.233

Table 3

Correlations among the MESSY Factors in the Brazilian Sample

MESSY Factors	Aggressiveness/ Antisocial Behavior	Social Skills/ Assertiveness	Conceit/ Haughtiness
Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior	-		
Social Skills/Assertiveness	-.091	-	
Conceit/Haughtiness	.541**	.043	-
Loneliness/Social Anxiety	.357**	.124*	.333**

Byrne, 1989; Carmines & McIver, 1981). The model and its standardized values are shown in Figure 1.

Before the final evaluation of the Model's fit, it is important to underscore some results shown in Figure 1. First, the paths from the latent to the manifest variables showed high scores, meaning that the latent variable could explain a high percentage of variance related to manifest scores. The error measures, however, showed small contributions to manifest variables.

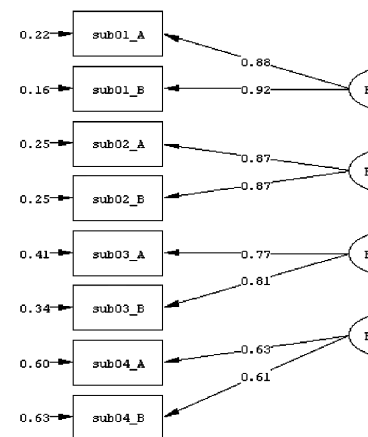
In sum, the results confirmed the hypothesis that the four-factor model provides a good fit with the data set. The chi-square (X^2) was 48.03 with 18 degrees of freedom. Goodness of fit was highly confirmed (RMSEA= .065; GFI= .97 and AGFI= .94).

Reliability

The reliability of the scale was calculated by the internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha). The total alpha was .85. The first factor (*Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior*) represented an alpha of .87, factor 2, *Social Skills/Assertiveness*, showing an alpha of .84. The third factor, *Conceit/Haughtiness*, is characterized by an alpha of .74 and the last factor, *Loneliness/Social Anxiety*, showed an alpha of .47.

Correlation with the Family Identification Test (FIT)

Table 4 displays the Pearson correlations between the four factors of the MESSY and the results obtained by the Family Identification Test (FIT). There are many significant associations between the two instruments, especially with factor 1 of the MESSY (*Aggressiveness/Antisocial behavior*), which is (negatively) correlated with almost all indicators of the FIT on the self-concept, identification and personality dimension level. There are also positive correlations between factor 2 (*Social Assertiveness*) and the FIT's social activity and social resonance dimension ($p < .001$) as well as with real identifications towards mother and best friend ($p < .05$). Factor



Chi-Square=48.03, df=18, P=

Figure 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Model for the MESSY and Standardized R

3 (*Conceit/Haughtiness*) is also correlated with the FIT's dimension of identification patterns towards significant others, showing a high congruence, as well as (positively) to the dimension of self-concept, whereas factor 4 (*Loneliness/Social Anxiety*) does not show any link to FIT variables.

In summary, the total score of the MESSY is significantly associated with the FIT's dimension of self-concept, emotional lability as well as with self-identification towards mother and best friend.

Gender, Age and different school environments

Analyses of Variance (Anova) with repeated measures were conducted in order to compare the MESSY scores regarding gender, age and school environment. The significance was defined as $p < .01$. Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations for the four dimensions of the MESSY, differentiated by gender and school environment.

Concerning gender differences, the results showed a statistically significant result found, indicating that the MESSY scores

Table 4

Correlations between the MESSY Factors and the Family Identification Test (FIT)

Family Identification Test (FIT)	MESSY			
	Aggressiveness/ Antisocial Behavior	Social Skills/ Assertiveness	Conceit/ Haughtiness	Loneliness/ Social Anxiety

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for the four Factors of the MESSY Differentiated by Gender and School

<i>Factor 1:</i>	Urban middle-class areas	Favelas
<i>Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior</i>		
Male	20.54 (6.76)	20.13 (8.19)
Female	18.46 (5.58)	17.39 (5.01)
Total	19.31 (6.17)	18.7 (6.84)
<i>Factor 2: Social Skills/Assertiveness</i>		
Male	50.01 (6.83)	48.18 (9.50)
Female	52.55 (6.74)	48.84 (8.20)
Total	51.54 (6.87) ^b	48.53 (8.82) ^b
<i>Factor 3: Conceit/Haughtiness</i>		
Male	8.3 (3.47)	8.83 (3.64)
Female	7.59 (2.76)	7.91 (2.94)
Total	7.88 (3.09)	8.35 (3.32)
<i>Factor 4: Loneliness/Social Anxiety</i>		
Male	9.07 (2.05)	8.13 (2.18)
Female	8.93 (1.94)	8.54 (2.30)
Total	8.99 (1.99)	8.34 (2.25)

Note. ^a Male scored significantly higher on factor 1 than females ($p < .001$). ^b Children from urban middle-class areas scored significantly higher on factor 2 than children from favelas ($p < .001$).

girls on factor 1, *Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior*, ($T = -2.846$; $p < .001$) in comparison to boys. In reference to the other three factors there no statistically relevant differences were found.

Similarly, Anova with age groups did not show any significant results in relation to MESSY dimensions. The results referring to school context did not show any difference between schools A and B and between schools C and D. Thus, it was decided to group schools A and B (children living in urban middle-class areas) and schools C and D (children living in *favelas*) together. The analysis of these two groups showed a significant difference on factor 2 - *Social Skills/Assertiveness* - ($T = 4.203$; $p < .001$), in which the children from middle-class neighborhoods scored higher than the children living in *favelas*. Moreover, no other significant difference was found relating to factors 1 (*Aggressiveness/Antisocial Behavior*), 3 (*Conceit/Haughtiness*) and 4 (*Loneliness/Social Anxiety*).

Univariate Analyses with these variables (sex, age and different schools) were also performed. The results showed no significant interactions among these variables.

In their paper they did not mention the percentage of variance explained. Spence and Liddle (1990) found four factors, which explained 77% of the variance. In the current study, the similarities between the two first factors of the Brazilian and North American model, the authors decided to adapt the original model with five factors. In the study, we used also the principal component method with the criterion of Kaiser to determine the number of factors.

The most recent studies were an adaptation of the model to the Latin cultural context with the transtheoretical model (Méndez, Hidalgo, & Inglés, 2002) and the current study). The findings of both studies showed similar factor solutions, which are characterized by five factors. To account for, approximately, the same amount of variance explained (33.28% and 29.7% respectively), we used the method used to define the appropriate number of factors was the scree plot in contrast to the formal criterion of Kaiser.

The global analysis of factorial structure across studies reveals that all studies found approximately the same number of factors, even when they were named differently. This suggests there is a similarity among factor 3 as found in Spence and Liddle (1990), Méndez, Hidalgo, & Inglés (2002), and the current study).

Table 6

Comparison of MESSY Factor Structure among Different Studies

Authors	Factor structure	Item numbers
Matson, Rotatori & Helsel (1983) from the U.S.	Factor 1: Appropriate Social Skills	9, 10, 12, 13, 31, 32, 34, 35, 50, 52, 55, 56
	Factor 2: Inappropriate Assertiveness	2, 7, 11, 14, 15, 39, 41, 53, 60
	Factor 3: Impulsive/Recalcitrant.	3, 4, 5, 6, 35
	Factor 4: Overconfident	8, 33, 36, 57
	Factor 5: Jealousy/Withdrawal	15, 38, 49, 54
Spence & Liddle (1990) from Australia	Miscellaneous Items	1, 18, 25, 26
	Factor 1: Appropriate Social Skills	9, 12, 13, 16, 31, 32, 34, 35, 47, 50, 52, 53
	Factor 2: Aggressive/Antisocial	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 18, 21, 29, 30
	Factor 3: Overconfident/Competitive	18, 33, 36, 43
	Factor 4: Loneliness/Hostility	22, 38, 41, 48
	Factor 5: Friendship	10, 28, 52
	Factor 6: Miscellaneous	23, 54, 61
	Factor 7: Cruelty/Social Anxiety	19, 26, 29, 30
	Items deleted from the scale	1, 25, 39, 57
	Factor 1: Aggressive/Antisocial Behavior	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 19, 21, 22, 29, 30, 41, 53, 54, 55
Méndez, Hidalgo, & Inglés (2002) from Spain	Factor 2: Social Skills/Assertiveness	1, 9, 10, 12, 13, 28, 31, 32, 34, 35, 46, 47, 50, 52, 53
	Factor 3: Conceit/Haughtiness	18, 33, 36, 43
	Factor 4: Loneliness/Social Anxiety	10, 25, 26, 28
	Factor 1: Aggressive/Antisocial Behavior	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 21, 22, 29, 30, 61, 62
Teodoro et al. (current study) from Brazil	Factor 2: Social Skills/Assertiveness	1, 9, 12, 13, 16, 31, 32, 34, 35, 47, 50, 52, 53
	Factor 3: Conceit/Haughtiness	15, 18, 33, 36
	Factor 4: Loneliness/Social Anxiety	10, 25, 26, 43

5, which are present only in the first study, showed Eigenvalues of 1.91, 1.18 and 1.09 respectively. This could be – as an alternative to the hypothesis of cultural differences - another explanation for the variation of factor numbers in these studies. In fact, the study of Méndez et al. (2002) showed eigenvalues of

The model with four factors was verified by a confirmatory factorial analysis carry out in Lisrel. The model with four factors fit showed that it is an appropriate model for the Brazilian study sample. Moreover, Cronbach's Alpha showed satisfactory

Méndez, Hidalgo and Inglés (2002). Only the original study (Matson, Rotatori, & Helsel, 1983) did not find any gender differences. Related to age the results showed an inconsistent pattern among the studies with the MESSY. While the present study did not find any significant differences, the others found some covariations with age.

The present study also investigated different groups of children living in diverse social contexts (urban middle-class and very poor areas). The results revealed that children from middle-class neighborhoods scored higher on appropriate social behavior than children from *favelas*. The low scores in social behaviors indicate deficits in these children's behavior repertoire, which are probably due to psychosocial stress factors associated with poverty. The socio-economic conditions in which these children grow up generate a risk pattern for unstable family relationships, diseases, unemployment and, as a consequence, the children's circulation among different primary caretakers (Schmiedt Streck, 2000). Such constantly changing and complex living conditions can easily be imagined as offering fewer opportunities for adequate modeling processes in relationships and social interactions, what also contributes to a deficit in the acquisition of behaviors considered socially more adequate in these children (Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, Carlo, & Miller, 1991).

As a final conclusion, the current study presented a successful adaptation of the Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY) to the Brazilian context. The results on psychometric properties are convincing and confirm the Spanish results from Méndez, Hidalgo and Inglés (2002). Subsequent studies are necessary to further evaluate the instrument itself (e.g. in terms of its temporal stability in longitudinal designed studies) as well as its application in different cultural and also clinical contexts.

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