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Integration Between Social Information Processing and Social-Emotional Competence

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Abstract

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The present article addresses the concepts of social information processing and social-emotional competence. The concept of social information processing is addressed from aspects of social adjustment and prosocial behavior, and the concept of social-emotional competence is addressed from both the social components and the emotional components. The article focuses on the relation between the concepts regarding children and is based on the assumption that social information processing constitutes a preliminary process for social behavior related to social-emotional competence. The professional literature addresses the two concepts, and from the review of the concepts the conclusion is that the moment children encounter a social situation a cognitive process is activated, at the end of which social behavior related to social-emotional competence is produced. The article addresses the relation between the concepts and indicates a number of questions. How is it possible to combine between the two concepts in the theoretical context and how is it possible to 'weave' from them instruments for the work of educators in the applied context?

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1. Introduction

One of the important developmental skills in childhood is the successful integration in the social world, and thus the integration of children requires the use of social-emotional abilities. There is a difference among children in these abilities, a difference that is influenced by individual differences among the children in traits such as cognitive perceptions, early childhood experiences, and so on. This article seeks to address two main concepts that influence the process of integration of children in the

social world: social information processing and social-emotional competence. Social information processing is composed of cognitive processes of the coding of external and internal hints of a social situation, representation and interpretation of these hints, clarification and choice of a goal (personal-social), choice of a response, and evaluation of a response. These processes exist from the moment the social situation appears and constitute a preliminary process for social behavior in the peer group related to social-emotional competence. Social-emotional competence is based on emotional abilities (for example, emotional regulation), cognitive abilities (for example, understanding another person and his intentions), and social abilities (for example, conflict resolution).

Throughout the article, the concept of social information processing will be presented from aspects of degree of adjustment and pro-social behavior, and the concept of social-emotional competence will be presented from the aspects of the social components and the aspects of the emotional components. The article will review the concepts with regard to the theories and the performed research studies, will present the relation between them, and will emphasize their importance both as knowledge and as an instrument for the work of educators of children in the social-emotional domain.

2. Social Information Processing

In the past four decades the social information processing approach has been one of the dominant approaches in the field of education. The social information processing approaches, which focus on social cognition, are based on the assumption that adjusted or non-adjusted social behavior derives from the functioning of a behavioral-cognitive mechanism implemented in response to outside social hints. In this context, Crick and Doge (1994) proposed a model of social information processing that includes five mental stages that lead to social behavior:

1. Coding of external and internal hints/situation.
2. Representation and interpretation of these hints / interpretation.
3. Clarification or choice of the objectives
4. Choice of the response
5. Evaluation of the response.

According to the model, this process acts in identical order in every individual, but every stage influences and is influenced by the historical personal mindset comprised of certain biological abilities and the information store of past experiences – memories rules, and cultural-social schema and knowledge that create internal models. These models enable the child who is exposed to new social stimuli to absorb a constellation of hints, to process them, and to give them interpretation and representation, and last to choose the most suited behavioral response in his opinion. Personal differences in certain stages in the process of social information processing cause the choice of a different response among the children, despite the exposure to a similar stimulus. The stages of the coding and interpretation are based on internal models of society, and therefore the child's negative perception towards society, following exposure to personal experiences, may invite a biased interpretation of social situations and in the continuation of the choice of behavior with antisocial

character (Crick & Dodge, 1994). On this basis, the choice of a behavioral response after any social situation cannot be disconnected from the way in which the information is processed in the individual.

Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) presented a model of social information processing that combines not only cognitive elements but also emotional elements related to social competence. They incorporated emotional processing in the model of Crick and Dodge (1994) and assumed that emotionality and regulation ability will influence the social information processing and the process of making decisions in social situations. Therefore, it is possible to summarize and say that social information processing is a cognitive process that includes a number of stages. However, it is possible to say that the cognitive process that the individual experiences also has an emotional process related to social competence. In other words, the personal cognitive interpretation is not disconnected from the concomitant social-emotional process. Therefore, the next chapter will review the relation between social information processing and social-emotional competencies.

3. The Connection between Social Information Processing and Social-Emotional Competencies

The concept of social competence has many definitions, most of which focus on the individual's ability to create effective social interaction with reference to different points of view of individuals involved in the interaction (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). There are four approaches in the definition of the concept. The first approach focuses on social skills, which include different aspects of cognition, emotions, and personal and social characteristics. Another approach focuses on social status, acceptance, and popularity and its impact on social competence. The third approach addresses systems of relationships, their quality, and the influence of the different individuals who are partners in the system of relationships on the system of relationships. The fourth and last approach is the functional approach, which focuses on solving problems, identifying social goals, results of social behavior, and the process that leads to these results. On the basis of the functional approach, models of the development of competence incorporating social abilities were built. One of the models is the social information processing model (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

Many research studies have examined the relation between social information processing and social adjustment defined as the individual's ability to achieve personal goals in the social interaction, while maintaining over time a positive system of relations with others. Difficulty in the adjustment is characterized by behaviors that are expressed in two ways, externalized behavior, such as delinquent behavior or aggressive behavior, while the additional difficulty addresses internalized behaviors that are expressed in social problems, avoidance, problems with thinking or attention, and somatic complaints (Rubin, Booth, Rose-Krasnor, & Mills, 1995).

Research studies that examined the relation between social information processing model and social adjustment found a relation between patterns of distorted social information processing and difficulty with social adjustment. Dodge et al. (1990) hypothesized that difficult childhood experiences will influence patterns of social information processing and will lead to behavior of chronic aggression. In other words, children who are exposed to violence and abuse in an early stage of their lives may develop patterns of distorted social information processing and social adjustment difficulties at a later

age. The corrosive experiences create constant alertness regarding the hints received from the environment during a social interaction, and this alertness may promote deficient processing of social hints, attribution of hostile intentions, and evaluation of aggressive responses that will lead to a choice of unsuited behavior. Additional research studies conducted in the field found that distorted patterns of social information processing can be expressed not only in aggressive behavior but also in regressive behavior and social isolation (Dodge et al., 1990). Burgess, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor, and LaForce (2006) proposed that regressive children are characterized by different thinking patterns regarding interpersonal interaction, which were influenced by social experiences of social rejection and victimization. A research study that examined the influence of friendships on the process of social information processing of regressive/shy children found that in contrast to aggressive children these children tended to attribute less external blame and hostile intentions to a familiar peer than to an unfamiliar peer and even tended less to attribute internal blame in cases in which familiar peers were involved (Burgess et al., 2006).

Nelson and Crick (1999) chose, unlike many other research studies that examined the relation between social information processing and aggression, to examine the relation between social information processing and prosocial behavior. They concluded that a different process of social information processing is a source of the difference between positive social behavior and negative social behavior. They asserted that the process of social information processing of children characterized by prosocial behavior is based on the attribution of positive intentions to others, attempts to preserve a social system of relationships and not to end it, and choice of response of cooperation in order to achieve positive outcomes in the social interaction. They even found that children with prosocial tendencies have a low chance of being bothered and anxious about social conflicts since they do not attribute negative intentions and malicious intentions to their peers, and therefore the chance that they will feel negative emotions that will lead to choice of an aggressive response is low. Nelson and Crick (1999) summarized that the model of social information processing predicts not only negative behavior such as aggression but also behavior of a socially competent character. A socially competent child is a child with the ability to understand others, to communicate effectively with others, and to respond appropriately to others. Such a child knows to join a game with his peers, to preserve the game, and to express emotions, and he generally is accepted by others his age and even can be popular (Howes, 1987; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Social competence is also expressed in the ability to cope with social failures and social rejection and even the ability to return and join a game in other ways, develop game strategies, satisfaction of personal needs, and fulfilment of personal goals (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

Today many researchers emphasize that social competence is based on emotional abilities, such as the ability of emotional expression, emotional regulation, and emotional understanding (Denham et al., 2003; Saarni, 1999). These researchers propose to use a broader concept: social-emotional competence, which includes reference both to emotional abilities and to social abilities (Denham et al., 2003). In addition to the social abilities, social-emotional competence frequently includes positive and clear emotional expression, ability to regulate emotions in situations of emotional arousal (positive and negative), and understanding of emotional situations and empathetic response to the emotions (Denham et al., 2004 ; Waters & Sroufe, 1983).

Children are exposed to the social emotional world already in infancy. Their social-emotional world is based in recent years primarily on systems of relations with adults and then also on systems of relations with children their age and social-emotional abilities help children during social contacts with them (Hartup, 1989). Children with social-emotional competence respond to others in an adaptive manner regarding the developmental stage in which they are found and the main characteristics of the developmental stage (Waters & Srouf, 1983).

The ability to hold effective and significant interactions with friends from the peer group constitutes a positive predictor of mental health and quality of life, beginning from the kindergarten. It was found that competent children with good social-emotional ability adjust better to the school and attain scholastic achievements more than do their peers who are less competent. In general, emotional-social competence was found to be a powerful predictor of development and adjustment in the future (Denham, 2006; Denham et al., 2003).

Emotional social competence includes three components: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral:

The **emotional** component addresses regulation, the individual's ability to respond with a variety of emotions and in a flexible manner. A regulated response that includes positive emotional expressions enables the production of spontaneous and effective responses and the creation of systems of relationships. A response that is not regulated that includes negative expressions leads to impulsive and ineffective responses and difficulties with social interaction (Cole, Michel & Teti, 1994; Denham et al., 2003).

In a situation of over arousal as result of pleasant emotions or alternatively hostile emotions and situations that inspire distress, the child needs the ability to regulate his emotions and adjust them to the situation. Difficulty with regulation can lead on the one hand to a situation of 'lack of regulation', which will be expressed in emotional flooding, and on the other hand a situation of 'excess regulation, which will be expressed in distance from interaction in order to avoid emotional flooding. In both cases, the result may be loss of an opportunity to acquire basic social skills and practice them (Denham, 1998; Katz & McClellan, 1997).

The **cognitive** component addresses the knowledge that includes familiarity with social norms and understanding that includes ability to differentiate between emotional expressions (verbal and nonverbal), understanding of the meaning of social-emotional situations, and ability to identify from them the reasons for emotions (Denham, 1998). Social-emotional understanding is related to the child's behaviors with friends with the peer group and his social status in the group. It was found, therefore, that good social-emotional understanding ability was related to situations of friendships and prosocial behaviors among children. In contrast, difficulties in social-emotional understanding were related to behavior of social regression and aggressive behavior (Denham, 1998; Denham et al., 2003; Dodge et al., 2003).

The **behavioral** component addresses skills and tactics that enable the child to effectively act in his relationships with others, such as the ability to use strategies of joining play, understanding the rules of play, holding effective negotiations, and solving conflicts (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

In sum, social information processing and social-emotional competence are interrelated concepts. Social information processing includes within aspects of social competence, while social competence is

based on emotional abilities. This relation begins with the cognitive process activated when we encounter social situations, and in the end social behavior related to social-emotional competence is produced.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, patterns of social information processing predict social behavior, which can be expressed both in prosocial behavior and in antisocial behavior (aggressive or regressive), which indicates social adjustment or lack of social adjustment. Research studies in which these behaviors were observed were also conducted in educational frameworks, since agents of socialization such as the school and the peers have an important role in the development of social abilities. These agents of socialization serve as a model for behavior in instruction and illustration of social values, facilitate the internalization of values and the drawing of moral conclusions, and influence the interpretation given by the children to the different behaviors (Eisenberg 1995; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Hence, the educational frameworks have an important role – to mediate between factors of risk such as socio-demographic situation (Runions & Keating, 2007) or factors of resilience such as prosocial behavior and friendships in childhood (Burgess, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2006; Nelson & Crick, 1999) and social adjustment. Contemporary research studies show that mediation for social behavior through processes of social information processing begins already at the age of the kindergarten (Ziv, 2012).

Social information processing addresses the cognitive process that is implemented when we encounter social situations, and at the end of the process social behavior related to social-emotional competence is produced. Familiarity with the process of social information processing and the meaning of each stage in the component stages and in-depth familiarity with the concept of social-emotional competence can constitute not only professional knowledge in the toolbox of educators but also tools for work with children in the social-emotional realm. Familiarity with the process of social information processing can provide educators with the ability of instruction and direction of children in their process of social information processing. Familiarity with the concept of social-emotional competence can allow them to improve and cultivate among the children essential social abilities that will lead to effective social behavior.

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