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# TELEVISION PREFERENCES AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN CHILDREN WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

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## SUMMARY

*Preferred television programs of children with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) were studied and analyzed to understand the influences in child identity construction. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with children aged 5 to 10 years with AS in Temuco, Chile. Data analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti 7.0 software, allowing category insurgence in open, axial and selective coding. Most AS children preferred television programs whose characters were heroes or villains, fictitious, not human and who expressed power over others. Their prefer-*

*ences were centered on games of domination, with little dialogue between characters, along with an important amount of fictional content. Children with AS also showed a tendency to postpone educational television programs. These results could be related to diagnosis characteristics. Predisposition to difficulties recognizing that television plots are not always accurate representations or models to achieve and maintain relationships in the real world, could intensify identity construction problems.*

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## Introduction

Hans Asperger described (Asperger, 1944) as 'autistic psychopathy' what came to be known years later as Asperger's Syndrome (AS), when Lorna Wing rescued (Wing, 1981) the forgotten works and proposed coining the term. The introduction of AS into the history of psychopathologies has been marked by controversies. In 2013, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 2013) eliminated the AS subcategory, instead placing it within the general category of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This new classification highlights that AS symptoms, and symptoms from other incorporated disorders, can be represented by a single continuum of alterations from mild to severe, in domains of social communication as well as restricted and

repeated behaviors or interests. On the other hand, the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (WHO, 1992) still defines Asperger's Syndrome as a pervasive developmental disorder subcategory characterized by qualitative decreases in reciprocal social interactions and communication modes, as well as a restriction in repertoire of interests and activities, which are often stereotyped and repetitive. The main characteristic of this alteration is that during the first three years of life there is no cognitive delay, and intellectual functioning levels are normal or high (Belinch n *et al.*, 2010).

On the neuro-cognitive level, alterations which hinder social communication entail a series of consequences. Human beings possess mentalist competencies and are aware other humans also have them, attributing

mental states in others; in addition, humans can predict behaviors based on mental entities, such as beliefs or desires (Hobson, 1995). However, children with AS have these skills diminished, and thus require more time to perceive what someone may be thinking or feeling. In this regard, numerous tests demonstrate the tendency for autistic individuals to fail in tasks related to mental theories (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985; Kaland *et al.*, 2002; Montgomery *et al.*, 2016;). Further research into the mechanical, behavioral and intentional understanding of these children shows that they present permanent problems in social performance, since these tasks require diverse information processing skills and systematic mental abilities (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1986).

Individuals with AS, in general, have few friends with

whom they can discuss and be informed about relationship issues such as friendship and codes of behavior (Wainscot *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, sources of information regarding human relationships can be sought, consciously or unconsciously, in television programs and films (Attwood, 2007).

In this context, the notion of television preference arises. There are numerous investigations regarding the effects of television preferences on children with neurotypic development; however, few studies address these effects on children with AS.

Rodr guez (2005) and, Del R o and Del R o (2008) pointed out that television preferences are made up by the set of cultural elements available to individuals. Depending on what individuals decide to watch, television and its content can be transformed into a

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## PREFERENCIAS TELEVISIVAS Y CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD EN NIÑOS CON SÍNDROME DE ASPERGER

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### RESUMEN

*El objetivo fue conocer y analizar las preferencias televisivas de los niños con Síndrome de Asperger (SA), para comprender de qué manera puede influir estas en la construcción de su identidad. Se realizaron 15 entrevistas semiestructuradas a niños de 5 a 10 años con SA de Temuco, Chile. El análisis de los datos se realizó utilizando el software ATLAS.ti 7.0 lo que permitió el levantamiento de categorías a partir de la codificación abierta, axial y selectiva. La mayoría de estos niños prefirieron programas televisivos cuyos personajes eran héroes o villanos, irreales, no humanos y que expresaban poder sobre otros. La*

*preferencia se centró en juegos de poder, con escaso diálogo entre personajes, con una alta densidad de ficción y postergación de contenidos televisivos de naturaleza educativa. Estos resultados podrían estar relacionadas con las características propias de su diagnóstico. La predisposición a tener dificultades para reconocer que las tramas televisivas no son siempre representaciones o modelos para lograr y mantener una relación con la vida real, podría agudizar el problema de la construcción de su identidad.*

## PREFERÊNCIAS TELEVISÃO E CONSTRUÇÃO DA IDENTIDADE EM CRIANÇAS COM SÍNDROME DE ASPERGER

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### RESUMO

*O objetivo foi conhecer e analisar as preferências televisivas de crianças com Síndrome de Asperger (SA), para entender como isso pode influenciar a construção da sua identidade. Foram realizadas 15 entrevistas semi-estruturadas com crianças de 5 a 10 anos com SA, em Temuco, Chile. A análise dos dados foi realizada utilizando o software ATLAS.ti 7.0, que permitiu o levantamento de categorias a partir da codificação aberta, axial e seletiva. A maioria das crianças preferiu programas de televisão cujos personagens eram heróis ou vilões, irreais, não humanos e que expressavam poder sobre os ou-*

*tros. A preferência centrou-se nos jogos de poder, com pouco diálogo entre os personagens, com alta densidade de ficção e postergação de conteúdos televisivos de caráter educativo. Esses resultados poderiam estar relacionados às características próprias do diagnóstico das crianças. A predisposição para ter dificuldades em reconhecer que as tramas televisivas nem sempre são representações ou modelos para alcançar e manter uma relação com a vida real, poderia agravar o problema da construção da identidade das crianças.*

positive contribution, generating happiness, laughter and fun in viewers (Glasesnapp, 2014; Grewenig, 2009) or a negative contribution, showing different models of antisocial behavior or violence, through programming or selection of inappropriate messages (Contreras and Moraga, 2005). This fact becomes relevant as children are considered active consumers of television programs and superhero films (Brown *et al.*, 2009; Geertz, 2003).

Based on evidence, it is recommended that families reduce the number of television sets in their homes, to avoid the aforementioned problems and also to facilitate selection of the most appropriate programming according to the child development level (Pinzón, 2011). Parental control and accompaniment is also recommended in order to promote television

quality, since children do not learn meanings alone, but through socialization. In this process, children assume the other's world and accordingly build a general scheme of meanings, which finally constitute a worldview (Berger and Luckman, 1978). Children learn information, concepts, attitudes, behaviors, values and meanings from television, which can later be reflected in social relations (Orozco, 2001).

In consideration of the above, prior research has focused on the preferences and television habits of children and adolescents. For example, from a list of child programs offered in Spain, it was shown that children prefer those containing more action and violence, manifested in inappropriate attitudes of the characters, leaving the formation of good values in the background.

Therefore, values such as care for the environment, dialogue between people and companionship, as reflected in educational programs, are marginalized (Sevillano and Perlado, 2005).

In Latin America, research performed in Argentina, pointed out that children, in addition to watching child programming, also watch adult programming; this occurs with or without an adult present, without dialogue between them if they are accompanied, unless there is an explicit requirement (Nigro, 2011). In Chile, a study conducted on 500 children in the Metropolitan Region (Christiny and Guzmán, 2013) revealed that 51% recognize watching programs for adults, 35% watch television in their room alone and 35% do not receive guidance on what to watch.

The effects on the behavior of children exposed to violence in the media has also been a study subject. Murray (2003) reviewed and synthesized research from the last 50 years on the influence of violent television. Results established that watching violence on television significantly affects levels of aggression, desensitization and fear in the viewer. Christiny and Guzmán (2013) showed that the most recurrent emotions that children experience while watching television are fear, terror and horror.

On the other hand, research has also aimed to identify fictional characters or children's series preferred by children and young people, as they exert a great attraction (Palmer, 1986) and can affect behavior and perception of the real world, to a greater or lesser extent (Ortiz, 2008). In this

context, studies show that the way audiences evaluate characters (traits, characters and properties) does not differ from the way they evaluate humans. Thus, viewers establish a relationship with fictional characters using the same mechanisms as in social life with people in the physical world (Bermejo, 2012).

Attraction to fictional characters or children's series is not only limited to heroes, but also to villains. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2016) investigated the fascination of children with villains, from the perspective of evolutionary and social psychology. The author proposes creating stories with villains can have an evolutionary purpose, showing the dark side of human nature, helping viewers experiment, learn and explore realities which are difficult to access, but less traumatic as television. On the other hand, villains generate a sense of power and domination, and do things that others cannot do due to ethics and morals (Langley, 2012).

Furthermore, the literature shows that subject individuality, state of maturation and development circumstances, also exert a significant influence on child socio-emotional development. For example, children over the age of eight are competent to distinguish between reality and fantasy presented on television, whereas younger children tend to do this evaluation case by case, without having this capacity fully developed (Kirsh, 2006). The ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy is even more deficient in children with AS, presenting difficulties recognizing that actions and television plots are not always accurate representations of how to achieve and maintain healthy relationships in real life (Attwood, 2007).

We studied and analyzed television preferences of children with AS to understand how it can influence identity construction. This information is relevant because it could facilitate the establishment of more effective collaborative

strategies between families and schools.

## Methods

### *Participants and corpus*

The methods used were of a qualitative nature. The paradigm was hermeneutic at a descriptive level. The participants in this study were 15 male children diagnosed with AS, between 5 to 10 years of age. All children were diagnosed by a qualified clinical professional according to provisions in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 2000); in addition, they were evaluated by the Autistic Spectrum Inventory (IDEA, for its acronym in Spanish; Rivière, 2002). The sample was recruited from basic education (primary) schools, in Temuco, Chile. The corpus consists of a set of fragments of paragraphs extracted from semi-structured interviews. These fragments are textual products resulting from literal transcriptions of audio recordings, with informed consent from both parents and children. The study was approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee of the Catholic University in Temuco, Chile.

### *Instruments for reading, summarizing and analyzing data*

The instruments used were semi-structured interviews validated based on expert judgment. Data interpretation followed the phenomenological-interpretative method through an analysis of meanings. A book of codes was created from networks and enriched with narrations from each interview until achieving theoretical saturation. ATLAS.ti version 7.0 software was used to analyze the data. The following symbols were used in empirical sample labeling: E expressed the term 'interviewed'; the Arabic numbers 1 to 15 corresponded to the order of interviewees, which was nominal and random. The next number corresponded to

age and finally, after a slash (/), a number referring to the marking line on the ATLAS.ti interface, concordant with open coding.

### *Survey questions*

We obtained data for the following guided interview questions with the previously described tool: 1) What type of television programs do children with AS prefer? 2) What plots and characters do children with AS prefer? and 3) What are the characteristics of the television content preferred by children with AS?

Finally, answers were analyzed qualitatively to raise codes and then grouped into categories according to open and axial coding processes.

## Results and Discussion

The following thematic axes emerged from data analysis: a) preferred characters, heroes or villains, non-human and unreal. b) Characters expressing power over others. c) Postponement of educational television content. d) Television programming with little dialogue. e) High fiction density.

### *a) Preferred characters heroes or villains, non-human and unreal*

Analysis of television preferences for children with AS showed they choose heroes and villains as models, marking an interest in non-real characters (Kirsh, 2006; Shane and Albert, 2008). The indicated preference can be seen in the following empirical samples: "The Magical Godparents (tv show), are magical beings; the villain traps the magical godparents because he is bad. His godparents, the wicked, the war leads to his evil world" (E1: 5/66). "I like the Joker, he invents things, he's like a genius, because he makes a poisonous gas that makes you laugh ...die of laughter" (E2: 7/112). "My favorite character is Joker, he is the main villain in Batman, he's kind of a psychopath, and he's like kind of

messed up in the head, he does things that don't seem very logical" (E4: 5/32). "Dr. Who is great, I mean, he's a mysterious doctor, a kind of alien, travels through time, he's a wise alien, he regenerates. I like it because it's fiction" (E9: 10/65).

The mentioned preferred heroes are post-classic. Classic heroes are characterized by saving the earth, winning battles and saving friends, where in the central activity is physical action itself, through which problems are solved and goals are achieved. The true goals of post-classic heroes are defined by a need to resolve the doubts, fears, worries or anguish affecting their internal world (Cano-Gómez, 2012).

A tendency towards pop culture villains was also present. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2016) proposes a series of qualities which characterize these villains. He points out that a true villain gives very little, demands a lot, and is mysterious. The most evil villains are usually foreigners, since in the evolutionary past foreigners represented a threat. Often these villains act intelligently and have suffered an accident which left them with great medical-aesthetic consequences. It should be noted that these preferences are not exclusive to children with AS, since neurotypical children also show attraction to these villains (Brown *et al.*, 2009).

Results show that children with AS are exposed to inappropriate television programming. Recent studies show that although movies and superhero programs demonstrate pro-social and defensive behaviors, children's commitment to superheroes is not related to increases in the frequency of these behaviors over time (Coyne *et al.*, 2017). On the contrary, findings are consistent with previous research, which has repeatedly shown that exposure to aggressive and violent content can result in more aggressive behavior (Murray, 2003; Contreras and Moraga, 2005; Christiny and Guzmán, 2013).

Despite the aforementioned, children's programs with a high violence content continue to appear on television. In addition, lack of adequate parental control further exacerbates the adverse effects produced in children. The combination of high levels of aggression and the parental approval of such aggression (justified by pro-social and defensive behavior), may explain the unique effect of superheroes in comparison to other forms of aggression shown by media (Coyne *et al.*, 2017).

Possible effects of this type of programming on children with AS are related to diagnosis characteristics. Children with AS present a stereotyped discourse in which aggressive words, and possibly actions, can be repeatedly imitated (Williams *et al.*, 2004). Pignotti (1976) pointed out that children learn first through observation, experimentation and imitation. In this context, television acts as an instrument for mediating and interpreting reality, offering various behavioral models. Among these, antisocial or violent models appear, which can also be learned from, as a result of inappropriate television programming.

#### *b) Characters expressing power over others*

Characters in children's stories often have conscious and unconscious desires for power and dominance; however, the need for power is most often observed in villains. Villains also have coercive powers; they exercise physical control or discursive power when they exercise mental control over individuals (van Dijk, 2004). These characters show a high need for personal power, characterized by desires to dominate others, which is closely related to competitiveness and aggression (McClelland, 1961).

The above can be seen in the following narratives extracted from interviews: "Garmadon tries to possess the powers, he is strong enough to use the four powers at once,

and uses them to destroy the devourer" (E12: 7/87). "I like Batman, his car gets destroyed. The Joker was destroying things and Batman defended the people to defeat the Joker" (E14: 9/34). "I like watching Ninjago, the ninja, he lives in a fictional world. There is an underworld, where the villains are like Lord Garmadon. Garmadon, was bitten" (E2: 7/56).

Results show children with AS mentioned characters who exercise power and dominance. Jiménez (2010) classifies these characters according to their villainy (personality, methods or motivation), as dark lord and/or tyrant. According to this author, one reason why people watch fictional programs featuring villains is so they can manage things in their lives which they could not otherwise. Villains fulfill a cathartic function, because viewers project their amoral or illegal fantasies which are prevented in real life by norms, culture and society.

What impacts can television characters exercising power and domination over others have on children with AS? These children have different needs than neuro-typical children, tending to social isolation, with a propensity to egocentrism, desires to impose their thoughts and a lack of interest in other's feelings and ideas. In addition, their disorder in social cognition and difficulties in inferring must be considered. Alterations in theory of mind affect social behavior, development of empathy and the ability to interpret complex emotional states in others (Montgomery *et al.*, 2016). This leads to a greater need for good models of adaptive behaviors for children with AS (Loukusa and Moilanen, 2009).

Currently, there are no studies directly addressing this issue; however, a small but growing number of studies on children and adolescents with disabilities considering violence in the media, can more thoroughly explain the possible effects on children with AS of

characters who exercise power over others.

Grimes *et al.* (1997) conducted a study on children aged 8 to 12 years with disruptive behavior disorders; they were shown brief violent scenes from movies. These children had less emotional responses to victimization of innocent people and a greater tendency to justify violence, in comparison to neurotypically developed children.

Observations correlate with the desensitization shown by children who are frequently exposed to violent television content. These children perceive aggression as a normal and acceptable way to solve problems; in other words, they become insensitive to the true meanings and impacts of violence (Murray, 2003). Based on the above, it is possible that inherent conditions of children with AS, combined with inadequate television environments, could diminish boundaries against the need for power and aggression, and activate hostile thoughts, which become more accessible to conscious thought (Baron and Byrne, 2005).

#### *c) Postponement of educational television content*

The present study showed that child interests were not directed at cultural or educational content, thereby evidencing the lack of parental control and accompaniment which is essential for children with AS. These children require decoding of television reality and audiovisual literacy, so they learn to independently choose more suitable television content. The above is evidenced by an example of chosen content: "Bajoterra, a fantastic underground world, inhabited by giants, monsters, the mysterious shadow clan and slugs who inhabit caverns" (E15: 7/056).

Media influence education and socialization processes because it involves group interactions and identity construction in young people. The early relationships developed between students and television have

made school the eventual place for reshaping the values built from this relationship (Medrano, 2006). Procuring the selection of educational television programs could favor socialization, pro-activity and offer conversation topics for both family and other interactive groups. In this sense, television could be a valuable tool for parents in educating their children, although in no way replacing family and school education.

The foregoing reveals ethical challenges in mass media consolidating social practices, since television has conditioning factors combined with other means of socialization, which, under unfavorable social conditions, can generate negative effects (Harris, 2002).

#### *d) TV programming with little dialogue*

Television programs are not always correctly understood by children and young people with AS, which could explain, at least in part, their low interest in programs with socio-emotional contents, which imply visual contact and prolonged dialogues between characters. The following response is an indication of the above: "The electric slug, takes all the electricity, I like it, it lives in the garbage can, it lives there to be safe, there are evil slugs" (E12: 7/056).

This response exemplifies the social communication difficulties and pragmatic problems presented by AS children (Martín-Borreguero, 2005). Children with AS develop a hyper-systematic attitude to understand reality, which hinders proper functioning of the central coherence system and, indirectly, theory of mind and empathy (Murray *et al.*, 2015). Generally, children with AS struggle with comprehending direct and indirect speech, whether simple or complex (Pérez, 2008). Faced with these obstacles, communication and visual language may be better choices for children with AS, since many are visual thinkers (Grandin, 2006) and images



greatly influence learning certain actions or symbols (Regis and Callejón, 2015). Thus, the preferences of these children for visual information obtained from television, which attribute to understanding of social behavior, could be due to natural selection based on their abilities.

On the other hand, most television traumas resulting from television programs and films are not oriented at facilitating dialogue comprehension in children with AS. Although editorial and programming orientations of public, cultural and educational television channels have considered that children and young people require a specialized audiovisual language in accordance with their development cycle, challenges still exist in terms of audience diversity and inclusion (CNT, 2015a; CNCA, 2016). It is necessary to mention that in recent years, the most relevant inclusion measures in promoting access to television services were aimed mainly at the population with audio and visual disabilities (CNT, 2015b).

Given current child programming characteristics and the communication differences of children with AS, early intervention and television programming control are necessary to facilitate and guide identity construction.

### High fiction density

Television viewing by children with AS in our study was also characterized by a high content of fiction, which often neglects real world experiences, vital projects, inter-subjectivity and face-to-face meetings. This is exemplified in the following child responses: "They live in a country called magical world, any word you wish can become reality, if you want a car you have a car, and all by magic" (E2: 5/018). "He is the strongest of all superheroes, he is invincible, that is, nothing can defeat him. He lives on another planet, sucked by a black hole" (E2: 9/098).

Although television cannot replace the direct experience obtained by interacting with the world, program content could be better oriented to provide children with AS more useful ideas to relate to; for example, suggestions for playing appropriately according to age, mixed with songs, dances and opportunities, so that children and adults can view it together, interact and imitate (Brereton, 2008). Another alternative would be to choose programs that could be used as a tool to teach about looking at people in the face, friendship, emotions and behavior (Baron-Cohen, 2009; Young and Posselt, 2012).

### Limitations

It should be mentioned that although the methodology allows to reach the main objectives, allowing an explanation to understand how television preferences can influence the identity children construction with AS, the results are limited by participants number. Subsequent studies should be done with larger samples, considering girls with this condition.

On the other hand, although a qualitative methodology was used, it would be interesting to perform additional studies to compare AS children with neurotypic children. A television preferences study in children with typical development (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2016) showed that they also choose heroes and villains as models to be seen. However, without a comparison group, it is not possible to determine if the factors associated with AS differ significantly from neurotypic population.

### Implications

Information and communication technologies have transformed the daily lives of children and families. According to Han (2014), these technologies belong to a culture called 'The digital age'. Therefore, children should be prepared to

understand media culture, think critically and participate in a positive manner. The approach of what we conceive as education and media literacy in particular should be reviewed, emphasizing the role of emotions in mental processes pertaining to television viewers (Ferrés, 1997). Incorporation of a media education curriculum would also be a relevant step to advance in this preparation.

It is necessary to promote policies, plans and programs which put family before the media, guaranteeing the quality of programs aimed at children.

Education and communication appear as substantial and interdependent parts in meaning construction. Not even the most powerful causal explanations of the human condition can make sense without being interpreted in light of the symbolism constituted by human culture (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985; Anderson, 1997).

What happens when plot preferences are immersed with fiction and fantasy, or when context is completely removed from reality? Television preferences of children with AS respond to characteristics of their condition, both from the viewpoint of their difficulties (for example: alterations in social communication, pragmatic language, and theory of mind) and their skills and competences (for example: visual thinking, focused on details and imaginative and creative thoughts). Story analysis shows a close connection between education and socialization, inclusion and social identity construction. Configuration of individual traits is affected by relations between education and adoption of cultural features from surrounding communities (Rincón and Estrella, 2001).

Regarding violent television content, it should be considered that children learn to behave through direct effort and observing human behavior. Various sources or social components serve as models for feelings, thoughts and actions.

Behavioral observation in media encourages imitation by spectators. Therefore, negative behaviors, hostile feelings and aggressive thoughts could be acquired and repeated.

Finally, it is pertinent that parents and caregivers of children with AS consider personal characteristics, development levels, affective needs and learning capacities when exposing their children to television, in order to protect them from negative influences and promote cognitive skills and social behaviors which favor appropriate inter-subjective relationships, thereby facilitating identity construction.

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