

# **Object relations as assessed with the Children's Apperception Test: a comparative study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study<sup>1</sup> aims to explore object relations in children with different clinical complaints as compared to an equivalent group, reporting no history of psychological difficulties. Responses given to the CAT by two different groups of children were analyzed: a control group, comprised of 20 children of both genders, with no clinical complaints, aged 7.15 years on average; and a clinical group comprised of 14 of both genders, aged 7.5 years on average, with different clinical complaints. The analysis was conducted according to the CAT scoring scheme, based on object relations, proposed by Leila Tardivo (1998). Interrater agreement, verified using Pearson's correlation coefficient, reached highly satisfactory levels. Significant differences were found between the groups, in terms of both the control group's psychological resources and the clinical group's difficulties in object relations. Despite the small-size sample, such data corroborate the hypothesis of association between positive object relations and psychological health.

Key words: CAT, child personality; object relations; projective techniques

## **INTRODUCTION**

Psychological assessment has always been one of the main activities of a psychologist. Since the mid-80s, a growing application of the object relations theories in the idiographic interpretation of material produced by children and adolescents in psychological assessment techniques has been observed, particularly in Rorschach's

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Method and in Henry Murray's Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). To the children's clinical psychologist, Kelly (1997) points out, the review of clinical material can help specify different levels of development disorders, particularly within the moderate to severe psychopathological spectrum, ultimately, helping the clinician evaluate the data more accurately.

According to Laplanche (1982), *object relation* is an

expression used quite often in contemporary psychoanalysis to designate the manner in which the individual relates with his world. Such relation is the complex and full outcome of a given organization of the personality, of an apprehension more or less phantasmatical of objects and of certain privileged types of defense. One mentions object relations of a certain individual, and also types of object relations of a certain individual or in reference to evolutionary moments (example: oral object relation), or psychopathology (example: melancholic object relation). (p. 443)

The *objectal relation* (or *object relation*) term is based on the psychoanalytical reference. Object relations theories are driven to the apprehension of the most original mechanisms of ego formation, highlighting the decisive relevance of the early object relations in such process (OGDEN, 2002/2003).

Summers (1994), in his book *Object relations theories and psychopathology: a comprehensive text*, following a careful presentation of the different object relations theories, reached the conclusion that, despite the differences existing among them, these theories share the common principle that contact is the fundamental human motivation – unlike the impulse discharge, as proposed by the impulse theories. To the author, despite Melanie Klein and Otto Kernberg having adopted the theory of impulses, both understand that the relevance of the latter lies less on their capacity of discharging tension, than on their role in the formation of the object relations that will set up the psyche foundations. The author furthermore points out that the object relations theories, unlike the strictly interpersonal approach, agree that pathological patterns can be apprehended, illuminated and resolved. Thus, the study of object relations and the identification of those patterns can help the psychologist to find the best preventive and interventional measures

for a specific child or group of children at risk of developing psychological problems.

D.W. Winnicott, pediatrician and psychoanalyst, deeply dedicated himself to the study of object relations, theme of several of his papers. In regard to the time at which object relations are formed, the author says

when mother and baby reach a settlement within the feeding situation, the bases of a human relationship are launched. That is when a child's pattern of capacity to relate with the objects and the world is established. (WINNICOTT, 1987, p.55)

Winnicott (idem) points out that this is not just the start of nourishment but also of the object relation. The individual's relationship established with the real world will be based on the way in which his/her relation with the mother begins and gradually develops. According to the author, the period required for the baby to start the search-and-find of the object (breast), as well as the time to explore it and, finally, turn it into a meal, can vary. That which the baby "creates" was already present, and is nothing else but the mother's part that was found. It is a fact that, if the mother were not in that special state that provides the baby with the conditions to be present at the right time and place, the object would not be found. Therefore, it is pivotal that the mother adapts herself to the baby's needs, making it possible for the baby to discover the world in a creative manner.

Winnicott (1984) emphasizes the relevance of a sufficiently good environment, i.e., the existence of adequate external conditions for the child's maturation potentials to be accomplished. The immature child needs two different and important aspects of care: the mother-object who fulfills the baby's urgent needs, and the mother-environment, figure of active care that protects the baby against the unpredictable. The mother-environment is the one that receives what can be called affection; the mother-object appears as a target of the baby's excited experience, to provide for his/her instinctual needs. Provided the environment is capable of providing such support for the child to develop, the child may start a process of integration between the mother-environment and the mother-object, which will form the base for the baby to develop its involvement capacity, which is fundamental for the individual's social life. In favorable conditions, the mother must remain physically available and exclusively concerned about the baby, survive the baby's attacks and remain empathic. Such experience with the mother favors the development of ego integration, a physical unit restricted by the skin, and a psychological integration. That is the time when the child is capable of recognizing the maternal figure as a whole person. Such are the bases for the involvement capacity to

develop, bases that relate in a positive manner with the individual's sense of responsibility. However, if the mother-object is unable to survive the baby's attacks, or if the mother-environment fails to provide a reliable opportunity for reparation, the child's involvement capacity is not developed, giving way to anxiety and crude defenses.

A landmark for the theoretical production of psychoanalysis was the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War period, when Winnicott was appointed Consultant Psychiatrist for the Government Evacuation Plan in a region in England. This allowed careful observations of the situation of children who had been separated from their families. In his book named *Deprivation and Delinquency* (1984), Winnicott publishes an article that supports John Bowlby's view concerning the separation of small children from their mother, reinforcing that the mental health of adults is built in childhood and in adolescence, as the child's emotional development can be easily disturbed. Still in that same article, the author draws conclusions, among which the one that "impersonal raising of small children tends to produce unsatisfactory personalities and even active antisocial personalities" (page 194). That points to the risk of psychological problems of children separated from their figures of care, and also of those whose environment does not favor development. Winnicott considered antisocial behavior in children as a reaction to both the loss of people who are dear to them and the loss of security.

According to Kelly (1997), continuously employing an interpretative lens that emphasizes the theory of object relations will allow the specification of different levels of developmental disturbances within the psychological assessment context. Observation of the quality of the object relations in a thematic projective technique driven to children may help understand the relevance of such relations in different situations of psychological vulnerability.

The Children Apperception Test with animal figures (CAT), created by Leopold and Sonya Bellak, is a projective technique specifically elaborated for children and that enables investigation of object relations. As a thematic technique, CAT uses figurative stimuli from which the child under assessment must tell a story. The stimuli were elaborated so as to look into the individual differences in facing the usual childhood challenges considered from a psychoanalytical perspective. (MIGUEL, TOSI, SILVA & TARDIVO, 2013).

Miguel, Tardivo, Silva & Tosi (2013) conducted studies aiming the standardization and investigation of CAT validity and reliability in Brazil, with quite favorable results. Such studies ensured approval by the Federal Council of Psychology for this technique to be used and commercialized in Brazil<sup>2</sup>.

## **OBJECTIVE**

This paper aims to verify if the analysis system proposed by Tardivo (1998) can discriminate the presence of significant psychological difficulties from the quality of the object relations. This system, based on the Theory of Object Relations, was created to assess object relations as expressed in the CAT. It is intended to investigate if the interpretative scheme identifies disturbances, at any level, of the object relations established by children referred for psychodiagnosis, and subsidizes indication of interventions that may ease its consequences. It is also intended to collaborate with the literature relative to object relations and its expression in the CAT with Brazilian samples.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

The sample investigated consisted of two groups. Group I was made up of 14 children with different clinical complaints (sexual abuse, hyperactivity, difficulties in school performance, aggressiveness, fraternal rivalry, reactivity to parents' separation), with 7 boys and 7 girls, with ages ranging from 5 to 10 years (average =7.5; standard deviation =1.28). Group II (control group), was comprised of 20 children with no complaint, 10 boys and 10 girls, with ages ranging from 5 to 10 years (average = 7.15; standard deviation = 1.72). Children with suspected severe cognitive problems were excluded from this study. The protocols used are part of a database created for a previous study, "General Project for the study of validation of projective techniques with the Children's Apperception Test - CAT", by Montagna et al., to which the paper provides continuity.

### **Instrument**

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<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, psychological tests can only be commercialized and used in Brazil after approval by the Federal Council of Psychology.

CAT was used in the investigation of object relations, in compliance with the Brazilian standards. This technique helps understand the manner in which the child relates himself/herself with significant figures of his/her life and deal with relevant impulses. The technique has the psychoanalysis as theoretical reference. The cards show scenes that were selected considering situations, problems and roles that are important in a child's development and life, from that theoretical reference.

### **Data analysis**

Dimensions of the children's stories were assessed according to the scheme proposed by Tardivo (1998), elaborated for analysis and statistical treatment of the stories of common children collected during a study she conducted in 1992. The analysis categories based on the psychoanalytical theoretical reference, particularly Melanie Klein's Theory of Object Relations, were created from the protocols data. The scheme is reproduced in the Annex.

The frequencies observed in both groups in the categories used were compared. To verify the existence of significant differences Fisher's Exact Test was used, a non-parametric technique employed to compare two independent small size samples (SIEGEL & CASTELLAN, 2006).

In order to verify the level of interrater agreement, two raters scored the 14 protocols of the clinical group.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Interrater agreement.** Of the 105 variables assessed by two raters, 35 presented 0 frequency, thus, not subject to the correlation function. Three other categories presented a quite satisfactory correlation ratio, from 0.83 to 0.87; three other categories achieved 0.78 agreement. As few as two categories (2RFP and 20a) achieved correlation less than 0.70, however, quite close to that value (0.68). These values show that the analysis scheme proposed by Tardivo (1998) is reliable concerning interrater agreement.

**Comparison between groups.** Fisher's Test revealed significant differences between groups I and II in the categories assessed by Tardivo's scheme (1998) in cards 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Significant results between groups I and II.**

Category of Response	Card	Number of stories		Fisher's Test
		Group I	Group II	
Gratification (supplier, provider mother)	1	3	14	0,007
Reaction to triangular situation: impossible to cope with (escape from card)	5	8	4	0,031
Dual relation	6	5	0	0,007
Reaction to attack: good defense organization	7	2	10	0,035
Focus on tiger's attitude: perceived as hostile, chaser	7	10	6	0,02
Relation with the family milieu and with adults: feels included, welcome	8	2	10	0,035
Others	8	7	1	0,004
Reaction to isolation: fear of other animals or men	9	0	5	0,056
Presence of object containing impulses (object as paternal figure)	10	0	7	0,014

The results show that the group with no psychological difficulty complaint, when compared to the clinical group, presented a significantly higher frequency in the categories of positive view of the maternal figure, as provider and supplier (card 1). Precariousness in the object relations in the children with a history of psychological difficulty is shown by the low frequency of this type of response in the clinical group: 8 out of the group of 14 children, mentioned no relation with the maternal figure in face of the stimulus, and some didn't even mention the chicken. This quite significant detail reinforces the theoretical findings relative to the role of object relations established with parental figures. Healthy object relations are also indicated by the higher frequency of a feeling of acceptance by and inclusion in the family milieu (card 8) in the control group. Half the individuals in the clinical group scored in the category *Others*, in which the most frequent stories pointed at absence of interaction among the characters, although the scene strongly suggests interaction among them. Here, one clearly sees difficulty in the involvement capacity, fundamental for the individual's social life, according to Winnicott (1984). Such capacity is based on a satisfactory relation with the care provider figure, within the range of satisfaction of the instinctual needs and protection against the unpredictability of the environment, marked by confidence in the relations established. Those two categories clearly point at sound object relations that show confidence in the social environment in terms of support, security and guidance. The control group also shows more psychological resources, given the greater frequency of the good organization category in face of attack presented (card 7).

On the other hand, the group reporting psychological difficulties presented greater frequency within the impossibility of dealing with a triangular situation – escape from the card categories (in card 5), which is reinforced by the higher frequency of the dual relation category in card 6. Those categories point at a primitive relation with the object, as they bring to mind the impossible inclusion of a third element into the relation. Besides that, in card 10, the children in the control group presented 7 responses in the “presence of object that contains the impulses – paternal figure” category while those in the clinical group gave no response in this category. These results are consistent with Winnicott’s view that oedipal issues are part of the general maturation process and must be experienced in a personal fashion if they are to become part of the individual’s life (Rosa, 2009). This means that there is a long way to go before one comes to oedipal experiences. These presume a high level of maturation and imply the fact that the child, by integrating the conquests in the previous phases, as being his/her own, reaches a unit identity. If the child fails to achieve the maturity required to be able to relate as a whole individual with other whole people, it will be impossible for such child to actually experience the oedipal situation.

Furthermore, on card 7 one observes predominance of focus on the tiger’s attitude, i.e., on the characteristics of hostility and threat from the environment, as compared to the resources to face them. As for reaction facing isolation, mobilized by card 9, the 31a-2 category (fear of other animals or men) comes quite close to the significance criterion, although not reaching it (criterion = less than 0.050; value obtained = 0.056) has higher frequency in the control group; on the other hand, in the clinical group, the response frequency in category 31a-1 (fear of fantastic male figures) is higher than twice the control group responses in such category. It is possible to assume that the fears raised in the control group are closer to the shared reality as compared to the ones raised in the clinical group. It should be pointed out that Mary Haworth identifies the fear of fantastic creatures in stories to the CAT as indicating Regression, in the category of phobic, immature or disorganized mechanisms, implying greater abandonment and impotence (MIGUEL, TARDIVO, SILVA & TOSI, 2013). Thus, precariousness in the organization of defenses and/or fragile defenses can be noticed, as well as the anxiety involved in face of an attack situation that configures hostility /persecution – items that do not appear in the control group stories. The responses given by the children in the clinical group in face of a threatening situation

emphasize the lack of internal organization to deal with adversities, since there is no structure to bear the attack – possibly due to precarious introjection of the good object. Winnicott (1979) states that the individual, when facing an adverse situation, will not be able to stand alone and overcome it, unless such individual has experienced the opportunity, through a sufficiently good mothering, to build a belief in the benign environment and that such belief cannot be built unless upon repeated and satisfactory instinctive gratifications.

The data presented show that the children in the clinical group were not offered an adequate environmental provision. Although one cannot precise the period in which the environmental failure occurred, it is important to point out that it implied a loss of confidence in the environment for those children who perceive the threats in a far more intense way, as compared to the control group children, feeling more vulnerable in that regard.

Thus, it is observed that in the control group the analysis scheme found children who express the possibility of gratification from the maternal figure, recognition of the oedipal triangular situation and feeling of inclusion into the family milieu. On the other hand, the clinical group showed less interaction with the parental figures, lack of confidence in the environment and experience of dual relation, showing little maturity and hindrances in the development process. Those data are consistent with those from other studies conducted with CAT in Brazil (Tardivo, 2011; Miguel, Tardivo, Silva & Tosi, 2013). It was also noted that cards 2, 3 and 4 did not differentiate the groups concerning the object relations. Within this study context, therefore, they are less sensitive towards the quality of the object relations as assessed by the scheme proposed by Tardivo (1998).

Although this study is exploratory and limited, given the small size of the samples and the heterogeneity of the clinical sample, the results achieved were consistent with Winnicott's view concerning the relevance of object relations to the development of a healthy personality. The study showed furthermore that CAT, interpreted through Tardivo's scheme (1998), identifies the association between object relation disorders and the difficulties of adjustment.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed to investigate the adequacy of the analysis scheme proposed by Tardivo (1998) to differentiate deviating clinical configurations based on the quality of the object relations as assessed by CAT. The study showed a high level of interrater agreement concerning the scores assigned to the various categories proposed. It also found that the interpretative scheme identified aspects consistent with healthy object relations in the control group and with some level of disturbance of object relations in the group of children with adjustment difficulties.

Although limited, given the small size of the samples studied, this study points at promising research paths that may help to better understand object relations in different clinical configurations and expand the literature in regard to CAT applications psychometric properties and range.

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## ANNEX A

### Analysis reference for the CAT according to Tardivo (1992, 1998)

#### Card 1

##### 1 – Relation with the Maternal Figure:

###### 1a - Dependence:

1a-1) growth inhibitor

1a-2) Growth Driving Force

###### 1b – Independence

1b-1) realistic

1b-2) magical, omnipotent

###### 1c – Hostility, attack

###### 1d – Reparation of attacks, of guilt

###### 1e – Gratification

###### 1f – Identification

###### 1g – Incorporation

##### 2 – Relation with the Paternal Figure

3 – Relation with combined figure – non dissociation, merger of paternal figures, primitive experience of the early Oedipal Complex, common in the first year of life (Klein, 1981).

##### 4 – Relation with Fraternal Figures

4a – Rivalry, competition, conflict

4b – Cooperation, comprehension

##### 5 – Others

#### Card 2

##### 6 –Dual Relation (no inclusion of third element)

##### 7 – Oedipal Relation (characters identified as parents, or differentiated by size)

7a) Conflict experienced in a ludic form

7b) Conflict experienced in a destructive form

###### 7c) Identification

7c-1) figure of the same sex

7c-2) figure of the opposite sex

##### 8 – Relationship with Other Figures (friends, siblings, acquaintances, etc.)

8a) Presence of the conflict experienced in a ludic form (playful game)

8b) Presence of the conflict experienced in a destructive form (fight, attack, defense)

##### 9 – Others

#### Card 3

##### 10 – Relationship with the Paternal Figure (as the figure of power and authority):

10a) Submission

10b) Child's fear in face of the figure

10c) Hostility, attack, depreciation, envy of the child in face of the figure

10d) Reparation (due to the attack)

10e) "Smartness in dealing with threats"

10 f) Cooperation, friendship

10 g) Other aspects of the paternal figure

- 11 – Relation with the Maternal Figure (as the figure of power and authority):
  - 11a) Submission
  - 11b) Child's fear in face of the figure
  - 11c) Hostility, attack, depreciation, envy of the child in face of the figure
  - 11d) Reparation (due to the attack)
  - 11e) "Smartness in dealing with threats"
  - 11f) Cooperation, friendship
  - 11g) Other aspects of the paternal figure

Card 4

- 12 – Relation with the maternal Figure:
  - 12a) Dependence
  - 12b) Independence
  - 12c) Hostility
  - 12d) Reparation
  - 12e) Gratification (mother that provides, protects from danger)
  - 12f) Identification
- 13 – Relation with the Fraternal Figure
  - 13a) Rivalry, jealousy, competition
  - 13b) cooperation, union
- 14 – Child's emotional reaction experienced presently:
  - 14a) Feeling pleasure, leisure, ride
  - 14b) Feeling threat anxiety
    - 14 b- 1) Confrontation, solution
    - 14 b- 2) Escape, absence of solution

15 – Others

Card 5

- 16 – Reaction of the child in face of triangular situation:
  - 16a) Impossibility of coping with the situation (escape from the card, rejection, illogical story)
  - 16b) Regressive responses, back to dual relation, with oral needs, no inclusion of the third element
  - 16c) Hostility, attack to parents' union, envy
  - 16d) Feeling of abandonment, helplessness in face of the parents' union
  - 16e) More realistic approach, showing greater independence
- 17 – Child relationship with the Fraternal Figure
  - 17a) Rivalry, jealousy, competition
  - 17b) Cooperation, friendship

18 – Others

Card 6

- 19 – Dual relation, no inclusion of the third element
- 20 – Relation in face of the triangular situation
  - 20a) Regressive responses, with attempts to return to the dual relationship, and oral needs
  - 20b) Hostility, attack, envy of parents' relationship
  - 20c) Feeling of abandonment, depression, helplessness in face of the parents' relationship
  - 20d) More realistic acceptance, showing independence and search of growth

21 – Others

Card 7

22 – Reaction in face of attack (focus on the monkey's attitude)

- 22a) Impossibility of coping with attack, helplessness, lack of protection
- 22b) Good organization of defenses, skill, “smartness”
- 22c) Denial of danger, omnipotence
- 22d) Provocation, hostility
- 22e) Disdain concerning the one that attacks
- 22 f) Others

23 – Relationship with the male figure (as the figure that attacks)

24 – Relationship with the female figure (as the figure that attacks)

25 – Focus on the attitude of the tiger perceived as:

- 25a) Hostile, chaser
- 25b) Threatening
- 25c) Cooperative
- 25d) Others

Card 8

26 – Relationship with the family milieu

- 26a) Feels included, welcome, understood
- 26b) Feels excluded
  - 26b- 1) Feels abandoned
  - 26b- 2) Reacts with aggressive attitudes
  - 26b- 3) Is punished

27 – Relationship with paternal figure

- 27 a) Acceptance, identification, projection
- 27 b) Fight, hostility, non acceptance, opposition

28 – Relationship with the Maternal Figure

- 28 a) Acceptance, identification, protection
- 28 b) Fight, hostility, non acceptance, opposition

29 – Oedipic Triangular Relation

- 29a) Return to dual relationship
- 29b) Hostility, attack, envy of parents' union
- 29c) Abandonment, depression, helplessness in face of the parents' relationship
- 29d) More realistic acceptance, showing independence and search of growth
- 29e) Other aspects

30 – Others

Card 9

31 – Reaction to isolation

- 31a) Fear of
  - 31a-1) Fantastic male figures
  - 31a-2) Other animals or men
  - 31a-3) Being destroyed or killed (for being alone, with no objects that meet his needs)
- 31b) Abandonment, sadness
- 31c) Independence, self-sufficiency, desire to grow

32 – Relationship with the Maternal Figure

- 32a) Acceptance, protection
- 32b) Hostility, non-acceptance, opposition, not to feel restrained\*
- 33 – Relation with the Paternal Figure
  - 33a) Acceptance, protection
  - 33b) Hostility, non-acceptance

\*Predominance of hostility and, as a result, persecutory anxieties in the attachment with the maternal figure that, in this case, is experienced more as an evil object than a good one. Thus, the ego does not rely on an object that can help the child cope with his/her anxieties.

#### Card 10

- 34 – Reaction to social rules, to discipline
  - 34a) Acceptance
  - 34b) Opposition
    - 34b-1) Reacts actively, fights against
    - 34b-2) Surrenders
- 35 – Presence of Impulses
  - 35a) Uncontrolled impulses– lack of an object to restrain them, lack of limits
  - 35b) Presence of Object that restrains the impulses
    - 35b-1) Object as maternal figure
    - 35b-2) Object as paternal figure
  - 35c) Guilt for the manifestation of impulses – fear of losing the beloved object through destructivity (depression guilt)
  - 35d) Punishment – fear of being attacked by the object due to his/her impulses