

**SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND CHILD STRESS: A STUDY IN LIGHT OF
CULTURAL-HISTORICAL THEORY**

**MEIO SOCIAL E ESTRESSE INFANTIL: UM ESTUDO À LUZ DA TEORIA
HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL**

**MEDIO SOCIAL Y ESTRÉS INFANTIL: UN ESTUDIO A LA LUZ DE LA TEORIA
HISTÓRICO-CULTURAL**

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ABSTRACT: The life context of postmodern society, which neglects rest and time in favor of the excessive search for results, has triggered stress in a large part of the population, including children who deal, at an increasingly early age, with adversities from the familial and collective life which they are a part of. Thus, the present article, of bibliographic character, aims to identify the social factors that substantiate stress and the child's psychic suffering, using the foundations of the Cultural-Historical Theory to support the discussion. It was concluded that the social environment, with its way of organization, is a preponderant factor for the triggering of childhood stress, impairing, to a great extent, the quality of life of infants.

KEYWORDS: Stress. Child stress. Psychic suffering. Cultural-Historical Theory.

RESUMO: O contexto de vida da sociedade pós-moderna, que negligencia o descanso e o tempo em razão da busca excessiva por resultados, tem desencadeado o estresse em grande parte da população, inclusive em crianças que lidam, cada vez mais cedo, com adversidades provenientes do convívio familiar e coletivo do qual fazem parte. Destarte, o presente artigo, de caráter bibliográfico, objetiva identificar os fatores sociais que consubstanciam o estresse e o sofrimento psíquico infantil, utilizando os fundamentos da Teoria Histórico-Cultural para embasar a discussão. Concluiu-se que o meio social, com o seu modo de organização, é um fator preponderante para o desencadeamento do estresse infantil, de modo a prejudicar, demasiadamente, a qualidade de vida dos infantes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Estresse. Estresse infantil. Sofrimento psíquico. Teoria Histórico-Cultural.

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RESUMEN: *El contexto de vida de la sociedad posmoderna, que descuida el descanso y el tiempo debido a la búsqueda excesiva por resultados, ha desencadenado el estrés en gran parte de la población, inclusive en niños que lidian, cada vez más temprano, con adversidades provenientes de la convivencia familiar y colectiva del cual hacen parte. Por lo tanto, el presente artículo, de carácter bibliográfico, tiene como objetivo identificar los factores sociales que justifican el estrés y el sufrimiento psíquico infantil, utilizando los fundamentos de la Teoría Histórico-Cultural para apoyar la discusión. Se concluyó que el medio social, con su modo de organización, es un factor preponderante para el desencadenamiento del estrés infantil, de modo que perjudica, demasiado, la cualidad de vida de los infantes.*

PALABRAS-CLAVE: *Estrés. Estrés infantil. Sufrimiento psíquico. Teoría Histórico-Cultural.*

Introduction

With the advance of the neoliberal socioeconomic model and with the new demands of an increasingly immediate society, psychic suffering and stress have increased at the beginning of the 21st century. The excess of daily activities, lack of leisure and rest, poor quality sleep, family and relationship problems, as well as financial concerns and self-collection for productivity, income and acceptance, are routine stressors present in the daily lives of social subjects.

Studies on the stress and psychic suffering of infants have been gaining proportion in recent years, even if in a very timid way. The incidence of severe stress in children is still unknown, however, it is known that every child will face stressful situations during childhood, which will directly impact their mental and physical health (LIPP, 2020).

Children's mental health needs to be understood as a polysemic, complex phenomenon that involves a range of aspects, among them: behavioral, emotional, social, cultural and related, in order to grant children skills capable of making them belonging and operating in the social environment in which they live, always considering their life contexts. On the other hand, child psychic suffering is effective when the child, through behaviors and expressions, manifests difficulties in dealing with stressful situations, which ends up harming and interfering in the development of routine activities, in order to impair interpersonal relationships and even cognitive development (CID *et al.*, 2019).

Taking into account that child stress expresses a strict relationship with the social and family environment in which the child is inserted, it is essential to ask questions about the ways of organizing contemporary neoliberal society and its possible implications for the psychological suffering of infants.

According to the assumptions of the Historical-Cultural Theory (THC), the process of human development is substantially social, and man is the result of the collective space in which he is inserted. Thus, if child stress is closely related to the social and cultural environment in which the child is established, it is important to associate this discussion with the studies of THC that imprint to humanity a socio-historical definition, considering it a product and producer of society, history and culture.

In view of this, this study aims to identify and discuss the social factors that embodies child stress and psychic suffering. The research is also justified by the urgent need to broaden debates about the stress and psychic suffering of children, especially in view of the current pandemic context that significantly altered the social configuration and peer life (GLATZ *et al.*, 2022).

Therefore, with regard to the problem that is intended to be investigated with the study, the following question arises: how do forms of social organization subsidize and promote stress and psychic suffering in children? To this end, with the purpose of seeking answers to this question and contributing to the systematization of new studies that associate the assumptions of THC with stress and psychological distress in childhood, bibliographic research was conducted.

Bibliographic research is based on the analysis and discussion of data and categories already refined by other researchers, which are recorded and available in documents, such as articles, theses, dissertations, books and the like. According to Severino (2017, p. 93, our translation), "texts become sources of the themes to be researched" and, in addition to basing the systematization and discussion of a research, they can also reveal gaps in knowledge.

For the construction of this study, we sought, a priori - on *the Google Scholar*® platform - for books and articles that addressed the social factors (experiences in the family and school) that incite the development of stress and child psychic suffering. It is emphasized that as an inclusion criterion, we sought only articles and books that dialogued about stress and psychic suffering in infants, determining as exclusion criteria the use of academic work in its entirety, such as theses and dissertations. A posteriori, we also selected basic texts of the that, in addition to discussing the main foundations of the theory, correlate with the theme of mental health in childhood.⁴

Thus, it is evident that this research was anchored in the assumptions of THC, conceived by Lev Semionovitch Vygotsky and built under the foundation of Historical-Dialectical

⁴ Using only systematized articles from these scientific papers, if available.

Materialism, a philosophical conception defended by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The article is subdivided into four parts, the first being a brief conceptualization and characterization of stress and its possible causes. The second consists of a discussion about stress in children, its causes and symptoms. The third weaves a dialogue between the precepts of THC and the influence of the social environment on the stress and psychic suffering of children. Finally, the fourth part brings the final considerations of the reflections made.

Conceptualizing and characterizing stress

The word stress, derived from Latin, is an adaptation of the English *word 'stress'*, whose terminology denotes the meaning of 'accentuation', 'tension', among other aspects. Moreover, stress can be interpreted as a necessary psychophysiological response for the maintenance of the body's life, which can occur in situations in which the individual feels confronted, frightened, angry, excited and even extremely happy. Stress comes, therefore, from the need to adapt to a circumstance and/or life event and, regardless of the stressful situation, the biochemical response produced by the body will always be the same (LIPP, 2020).

When a subject is in a challenging and stressful situation, three body systems are activated by means of a reaction triggered by the hypothalamus, which are: the sympathetic Autonomic Nervous System (SNAs); the immune system and the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis (HPA). Both systems are responsible for producing biochemical changes in the body, which are extremely necessary for the immediate coping of the stressor, such as the elevation of blood pressure, the dilation of the pupil and bronchi, the blockade of digestion, the release of hormones – adrenaline and norepinephrine in the bloodstream – elevation of blood glucose, stimulation of skeletal muscles and brain, in addition to promoting alert and surveillance behaviors (SOUZA; SILVA; GALVÃO-COELHO, 2015).

The literature reveals that, in cases where stress is used for positive coping with challenging actions and for motivation and/or maintenance of survival, we can call it "eustress". On the other hand, the stress that overloads the control mechanisms and makes it impossible to use responses to the event and/or stressful situation, producing harmful effects to the subject, is called "distresse" (PACÍFICO; FACCHIN, CORRÊA SANTOS, 2017).

The human body works in perfect harmony: the organs work assertively and collaboratively to ensure that all their vital functions are successfully administered. When the individual is faced with a stressful situation, the organs begin to work in an unusual way, like the heart, which ends up pumping the blood more quickly; the stomach has some difficulty in

digesting food; and the intestine resolves to work, faster or slower, depending on the individual. In the great vital orchestra of the human body, there is no more balance and, without the homeostasis so necessary to keep everyone 'playing in the same compass', the subject begins to feel confusion and physical and mental discomfort (LIPP, 2004).

With the lack of body homeostat⁵, prompted by a physiological response to a stressor, the activity of the endocrine system increases, in particular, the activation of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal axis (HHA), which intensifies the secretion of several hormones, among them, cortisol, commonly known as stress hormone. In everyday situations, in which stress has a short duration and a low prevalence, severe problems will hardly occur in the body. However, when stress becomes chronic, with events of great duration and high prevalence, our physical structure gradually degrades, taking into account that cortisol, at the moment it is secreted uninterruptedly, can cause physical problems, such as hypertension and the development of gastritis and ulcers, deficiency in the functioning of the immune system, in addition to premature aging of the hippocampus and brain damage with cell death (BARLOW; DURAND, 2015).

In 1936, the endocrinologist Hans Selye made an incidental observation that resulted in a new area of medicine studies: the physiology of stress. According to him, the 'General Adaptation Syndrome' (EMS) presents three distinct stages that occur in the body in response to continuous stress. The first is the 'alarm' phase, beneficial for the maintenance of life, as it generates an immediate reaction to any danger faced by the individual. A posteriori, the phase of 'resistance' arises, when the organism mobilizes adaptation mechanisms to react to the stressor. Finally, if the source of stress remains active, with greater durability and/or intensity, the 'exhaustion' phase occurs, in which a process of deterioration of the body begins, which may suffer from various physical and psychological diseases, in order to suffer permanent damage (BARLOW; DURAND, 2015). It is worth mentioning that psychologist Marilda Lipp incorporated a fourth phase into the model proposed by Selye, located between 'resistance' and 'exhaustion', called 'near-exhaustion', which represents the principle of illness (CAVALCANTI *et al.*, 2021).

In all phases mentioned, there are some physical and psychological symptoms that may vary the existence and intensity, depending on the organism of each individual. Predominantly common symptoms include: increased blood pressure (hypertension); Palpitations; stomach

⁵ Property of the human body in regular various functionalities, such as body temperature, pH, blood pressure (and other functions), in addition to fluids.

problems, such as ulcers and gastritis; Sweating; dizziness; mood swings; constant irritability; tiredness; memory loss; changes in eating habits; anxiety; sleep problems, among others (PACÍFICO; FACCHIN, CORRÊA SANTOS, 2017).

Regarding the above, it is possible to understand that stress, when experienced in a chronic way, is a source of physical and psychological problems that impair the quality of life, in order to generate permanent dysfunctions in the individual. Next, we will discuss the perception of stress in children, more specifically, its main causes and symptoms.

Child stress

The onset of stress in childhood can have a great impact on the development of the nervous system, taking into account that, in the early stages of life, there is the beginning of the maturational process of the brain that, in addition to causing crucial changes in the action of the HHA axis, vulnerable the individual, making him predisposed to the occurrence of psychological disorders in other stages of life (BARLOW; DURAND, 2015).

Searches (ABRANCHES; ASSIS, 2011; CID *et al.*, 2019; GOMIDE *et al.*, 2005) also point to the fact that people diagnosed with psychopathologies, as adults, had, for the most part, early signs since childhood, which were often confused with shyness or generalized as being just 'one phase'. This contributes to the premise that psychological suffering, which occurs in the first years of life, can accompany the individual during his adolescence and adulthood.

The potentially triggering factors of stress in children vary according to the subjective aspects of each. However, according to Lipp (2020), there are situations that manifest themselves repeatedly in the lives of stressed children. Here, it is worth understanding that, for THC, the child is considered a social subject that develops, while their internal psychic conditions are remodeled through external actions, coming from the social environment (BOGOYAVLENSKY; MENCHINSKAYA, 2005). In this sense, the objective conditions of children's lives can impact the triggering of stress or even prevent it.

Thus, it can be affirmed that stress is incited by internal sources, coming from the psychic/cognitive development and maturation of each subject, as well as external sources, which correspond to stressful situations and experiences arising from the social and family life of each one. To this end, Lipp (2020) mentions some conditions that favor the development of stress in children, which are listed as external situations: death and/or divorce of parents; the establishment of a new family of separated parents; the birth of a brother; the mother's work; the financial instability of the family; diseases that aggravate your health or that of your parents;

difficulties in school adaptation; change of residence or close friends; excessive load of activities during the day; excess responsibilities; recurring parents' fights; rejection of colleagues and ambivalent social demands.

Among the internal motivations that trigger stress and accompany the child's growth phases, the author emphasizes: shyness; anxiety; the desire for belonging and constant acceptance; the fear of failure; concerns about the physical changes of the body itself; the erroneous and frightening interpretations of common and routine events (LIPP, 2020).

In addition to understanding the factors that cause and trigger stress in children, it is necessary, first, to understand a little about their maturational development and how learning is effective during childhood. Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev (2016) elucidate that the process of child development follows that of learning, emphasizing that both are not necessarily produced in a similar and regular way. It is worth noting, here, that the child's learning takes place long before his/her insertion in school, more specifically, since his first days of life, and that he develops while learning.

According to Lipp (2020), the sources for the development of stress in children can be caused by physiological characteristics whose sensations are uncomfortable, such as hunger and pain. They may, however, come from learning, such as fears, prejudices, phobias, etc. Each stage of child development presents itself as a fertile ground for the emergence of stress and anxiety, in view of the wide range of conflicts and problems to be solved. As it develops, matures and learns, the child integrates and incorporates, in its repertoire, new strategies to deal with the sources of stress; thus, own mechanisms of action are elaborated in front of these sources, considering that "[...] by changing the development process, the individual reacts *differently* to external stimuli" (BOGOYAVLENSKY; MENCHINSKAYA, 2005, p. 65, our translation).

In a way, children react to stress by expressing immediate symptoms by making a tantrum, behaving in an overactive manner, presenting excessive fears and terrors – even losing voiding control (enuresis). As stress becomes chronic, the immune system weakens, symptoms worsen and diversify, manifesting physical problems such as tachycardia, tensions in muscles, sweating, dermatological diseases, asthma, stuttering, intestinal problems – diarrhea, nausea – nervous tics, restlessness, abdominal and headache pain, teeth grinding, caries etc. On the other hand, emotional symptoms with a higher prevalence rate refer to the appearance of aggression incompatible with the child's personality, unusual disobedience, anxiety, outbursts of crying, depression, school and relationship difficulties, apathy, nightmares, insomnia and night terror (LIPP, 2020).

Stress causes problems that intensely impair the quality of life of individuals, but children suffer much more, since most of them have little – or none – psychic and emotional resource to deal with the adversities present in everyday life in society. Next, the precepts of THC will be approached, unseeing the way in which the social environment raises and provides stressful sources present in children's daily lives.

The Historical-Cultural Theory (THC) and the social environment as a trigger of child stress: a possible tessitura

THC began with the studies of psychologist Lev Semionovitch Vygotsky who, through a Marxist basis, proposed to understand the human psyche. Marxist foundations show that historical changes in social and material ways of life establish significant changes in the subjects' consciousness and behavior (FACCI, 2004).

Vygotsky emphasized that the human psyche develops from social relationships and cultural coexistence, being mediated by the use of instruments and signs that are placed between the individual and the object of his activity. For him, superior psychological functions, such as attention, memory, imagination, thought and abstraction, are developed through the interaction of the subject with the world and with the most experienced individuals. For THC, language is seen as paramount to the evolution of the human being, because it allows communication and social exchange, using signs as a form of action (FACCI, 2004).

How can we, however, relate the fundamentals of THC to the development of stress in children? The answer to this question can be elucidated in the following sayings: "[...] man is a social being and, outside the relationship with society, he would never develop the qualities, the characteristics that are the result of the methodical development of all humanity" (VIGOTSKY, 2018, p. 90). According to this premise, the social environment is the source for the individual to develop particularities and abilities specific to his species, considering that society carries with it historically developed traits that seek to give continuity and meaning to human existence. More than that, Vygotsky (2018) declared that human development is predominantly social; also, that superior psychological functions arise, a priori, as forms of collective behavior of the child through the collaboration of other individuals. Such shapes are later internalized and become individual traits.

Recent studies with monkeys validate this premise (GILLESPIE; NEMEROFF, 2007; COPLAN *et al.*, 1998), because they expose that psychosocial order factors can directly affect the levels of neurotransmitters produced by primates, which ratifies the principle that, perhaps,

neurochemical substances produce different effects, depending on the environmental and psychological history of the individual. In addition, other experiments show that the act of accommodating monkeys in community expands the amount of gray matter in different parts of the brain led by social cognition, which includes the ability to interpret facial expressions, gestures, anticipate and predict behaviors (BARLOW; DURAND, 2015).

Moreover, science has already proven that there is a direct interaction between genes and the environment, signaling that the social environment can activate certain genes that alter the number of receptors on the margins of neurons, which would consequently affect the biochemical functioning of the brain, so that it is possible to trigger genetic vulnerabilities that would favor the development of psychic disorders according to the reaction presented before a stressful event (BARLOW; DURAND, 2015).

It is unveiled, then, that the subject is the pure expression of his subjective conditions of life. According to Lipp (2004, p. 18, our translation), "stress assumes the face of those who have it", which means affirming that the social space is relatively important and impacting on the development of potentialities and/or suffering, depending on the subjective experiences of each one.

The family and the school are the two major institutions responsible for the stressful events that most affect children. With their internal conflicts, custody disputes, arrival of new siblings, lack of minimum socioeconomic conditions for survival, lack of attention, absence of solid affective bonds with parents, constant fights and the confused and ambiguous discipline on their part, as well as the stress coming from adults present within the family, are the main sources for the development of stress in the child within the family (LIPP, 2004, 2020).

In the educational space, where the child spends a long period of his life, the main stressors present are the result of anxious and stressed teachers, a rigid discipline that does little respect the cognitive and maturational development of the *child*, *bullying* and prejudice committed by other colleagues, the difficulty of adaptation and acceptance of peers, of excessive activities and short play and rest time (LIPP, 2004, 2020).

Stressed children represent a serious public health problem, because, in addition to manifesting significant losses in family and peer relationships, school life is impaired and learning difficulties and developmental problems are caused. In addition, child stress can favor psychic suffering in later stages of life, such as adolescence and adulthood.

Thus, it is necessary that the social environment that permeates the subject's life be built under a secure foundation, based on autonomy and dialogue (SZYMANSKI, 2010). For the family, it is up to the role of developing an active listening of the child, always seeking to

understand what they have to say in the face of the countless situations experienced in their daily lives. It is necessary to provide her autonomy, without, however, overloading her with tasks and tasks, allowing her a safe space to experience childhood, to experience life and the world. It is also essential that adult discussions be treated and resolved away from the child, trying not to involve it in exhausting, intricate and unresolved problems.

At school, in turn, is the duty to have respect for the specificities of each subject, thinking about learning as a process before school life. It is necessary to be aware that each child has idiosyncrasies that make them different from each other. Finally, teachers must not bring their longings and frustrations to the work environment, taking a close care to the behaviors of the little ones in the classroom, as they can express larger problems, such as relationship difficulties, learning and even the face of prejudice and/ or *bullying* by colleagues. The attentive eye makes all the difference and, in this case, is the threshold between: a happy and willing child and a stressed child.

Final considerations

The present study, as idealized, sought to identify the social factors that embody child stress and psychic suffering. As we resume the main objective, new questions and doubts erupt, now regarding the mental health and psychological suffering of children, as well as under the preponderance of the social environment in triggering anxiety and depression in childhood.

In view of the theoretical references used, it was found that, as THC argues, man is a social being that develops in an integral way and according to influences and relationships with the environment. It was verified that the development of the subject takes place through a historical-social basis that constitutes practices capable of making individuals aware of their role and their performance within society.

It is also perceived that the social environment has a fundamental role in triggering stress in childhood, being some of the main stressful sources faced by the child public: the difficulty of school adaptation; fights and divorce from parents; socioeconomic instability; changes of residence; the stress of parents and/or teachers; the excess of school activities; rejection of colleagues; deaths in the family; and the desire to belong to a group.

Vygotsky (2018) stated that there is a social basis that supports the development of subjective skills and that the learning process is always effective from the outside to the inside, from the social to the individual. The human being, so influenced by the environmental factors that surround him, is constituted as he experiences the world around him and understands it.

Thus, it is necessary to consider that, if the social and family foundation of a child is weakened, favoring the routine promotion of stressful situations and difficult management, there is a great possibility that this child develops stress during his childhood; it is appropriate to emphasize: if not observed and treated adequately, it will harm your psychic health at later stages of life.

Despite the limitations of this study – such as having dealt only with the phenomenon of stress in children, not relating it to the psychic suffering arising from its chronicity – it provides essential subsidies for a broader understanding of the role and contribution of the social environment in the development or not of stress in children.

In addition, this research aims to provide subsidies that favor new studies that aim to associate the foundations of THC with the stress and psychic suffering of children, young people and adults, in order to seek new ways to make social relationships healthier and less harmful to individuals.

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