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Role and interdependence between suggestibility–anxiety, and intellectual level in the structure of personality

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Abstract

The present study aims, on the one hand, to demonstrate the relationship of dependence between the level of intellectual development and the degree of suggestibility and anxiety, and, on the other hand, to elucidate the position and functional complexity of suggestibility and anxiety within personality structures. In order to validate or refute the initial assumptions, we administered assessment instruments to two groups of participants: primary and lower secondary school students with typical intellectual functioning and students with intellectual disability. The analysis was also conducted from the perspective of the participants' gender. The results obtained were analyzed both separately for the two groups and comparatively.

Keywords: typical development, intellectual disability, suggestibility, anxiety, basic psychological structure, secondary psychological structure

In our analysis, we start from the premise that there are specific differences in the way the psychological structures of individuals with intellectual disability are formed and developed, compared to those of individuals with typical intellectual functioning, as a result of biological alterations and external influences. Therefore, psychological and socio-cultural characteristics predominantly shape psychobehavioral distortions as expressions of personality.

These differences, which pertain to overall psychological activity, significantly affect—at a qualitative level—both the structure of intellect and that of personality. Within this context, a range of particularities emerges, determined by the biological component and by psycho-social conditions, which contribute to the formation of the psychic system and generate a distinctive profile in the assimilation, internalization, operationalization, and elaboration of adaptive–integrative behaviors.

Our study was based on two hypotheses, namely:

1. We assumed that suggestibility and anxiety are directly influenced by the level of intellectual development.
2. We considered that suggestibility and anxiety are fundamental components of personality and influence the construction of personality typology as well as general human behavior.

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Given that both personality and intellect develop gradually from early childhood, and that during the school years a substantial part of these structures is established—becoming relatively stable in adulthood—these considerations represent, among others, key arguments for why our experimental research included two groups of participants: school-age children with typical intellectual functioning and school-age children with intellectual disability. We also considered that comparing the research results obtained from the two categories of participants would allow for a more rigorous highlighting of the findings and would increase the level of confidence in validating the proposed hypotheses.

While research conducted by various authors shows a relative consensus regarding the explanation of neuropsychic mechanisms underlying intellectual structures in both typically developing individuals and those with intellectual disability, contradictory viewpoints emerge when it comes to the personality of individuals with intellectual disability. Thus, the specialized literature outlines three main trends. The first maintains that the personality of individuals with intellectual disability is a nonsensical construct, arguing that the meaningful structures characteristic of psychological subsystems that could organize such formations cannot be identified (A. Busemann, 1965). The second trend results from a more or less intentional bypassing of the issue of personality in individuals with intellectual disability—this does not involve a denial of personality, but neither an explicit affirmation; rather, the reader is left to infer certain specific traits from descriptions of instrumental functions and characteristics of psychological processes, particularly motivational–affective ones. The third trend is characterized by the unequivocal affirmation of the need to address the personality of individuals with intellectual disability and the possibilities of shaping it, within certain limits, through educational and recreational influences (R. Perron, 1979; E. Verza, 1988).

By taking into account the existence of the classical traits of personality (temperamental, characterological, and aptitudinal), together with the recognition of the dependence of their development on the individual’s psychological structures, we assert that the personality of individuals with intellectual disability develops within a specific context.

In individual development, certain dominant personality traits take shape, around which all others are organized and which make one type of behavior or another predictable. Depending on how these traits combine and on the relative weight of secondary traits, two types of personality structure emerge: harmonious or disharmonious. On the one hand, we considered that in children with intellectual disability of the mild intellectual disability type, suggestibility and anxiety may become central characteristics over time, with all other traits polarizing around them; on the other hand, these characteristics may facilitate or educationally influence the formation of personality traits. A similar situation can be observed in children with typical intellectual functioning, although the relationships established between dominant traits and secondary traits (subordinate to the former) are far more complex.

In both groups of participants, the category of dominant (central) traits is much more limited in comparison with the category of secondary (subordinate) traits, and the development of the latter is more strongly dependent on the given situation and on the way, it is internalized and experienced. In earlier work (1988), we demonstrated that suggestibility and anxiety belong to the category of dominant, central characteristics in relation to the others, which are secondary—not due to their significance for the personality domain, but rather because of their mode and type of formation. Both suggestibility and anxiety are more closely linked to the individual’s biological nature, without excluding social and relational influences, which play a characteristic role in the structure of personality.

In order to validate the hypotheses, we sought to capture, in both children with intellectual disability and typically developing children, the depth and extent of suggestibility and anxiety, and subsequently to highlight the secondary traits that take shape and give personality its specific profile.

Thus, we investigated a sample of 120 participants with mild intellectual disability: 60 boys and 60 girls from the 4th, 5th, and 7th grades, with 40 participants from each grade, along with an equal number of participants with typical intellectual functioning, distributed across comparable grades in mainstream (regular) schools. The selection of the research samples was carried out randomly. Each participant took part directly in two play activities (playing “the shop” and putting the doll to bed), was asked to complete a sentence with missing elements, to solve a mathematics exercise, and to listen to a well-known story (*The Goat and Her Three Kids*). In each task, six suggestive situations and three situations designed to elicit an anxious experience were introduced. In the sentence-completion task and in the mathematics exercise, incorrect solution strategies were suggested, even though all the children knew the correct answer, a fact verified beforehand.

In the story, an anxiety-provoking situation was presented, and an alternative ending was suggested, after which the participant was asked to retell the story without being given any indication as to the form it should take. At the same time, teachers were asked to compile a list of positive and negative personality traits for each pupil. These data were correlated with the observations made by the experimenter during the experimental activities and with characteristics related to suggestibility and anxiety. We recorded the number of suggestive responses, their depth and extent, whether they were accepted with or without commentary, the level of interest and motivation for the activity, the manner in which the anxiety-provoking situation was perceived, and the behavior manifested in relation to the introduced suggestions, among other aspects.

A. Binet (1905) considered suggestibility to be a capacity specific to each individual to respond to suggestions, and similarly, C. L. Hull (1933) observed that more intelligent individuals are more suggestible than those who are less intelligent. Increasingly, the idea has gained acceptance that suggestibility constitutes a personality trait, given that suggestion is manifest in communicational interrelations. Based on rigorous experiments, U. Şchiopu (1972) demonstrated that suggestion contributes to the development of patterns of behavior in which specific motivations become evident.

This specific motivation can relatively suspend deliberation in the subject exposed to suggestion and organizes behavior sequentially according to the imposed motivation. A series of variables—such as age, level of education, intelligence, gender, etc.—influence the degree of suggestibility of individuals. In our experiment, we examined the dependence of suggestibility and anxiety on such factors, as well as the way in which these variables correlate with personality traits.

The analysis of the results obtained was carried out for each participant individually, after which general typological characteristics were considered for the two groups, as well as by gender. Based on the observed behaviors and responses, participants were divided into three groups: highly suggestible, suggestible, and non-suggestible.

Table 1. Numerical and percentage distribution by gender of the degree of suggestibility in the group with intellectual disability

Grade	Sex	Highly Suggestible		Suggestible		Non-Suggestible		Total
		no.	%	no..	%	no.	%	
IVth	G	3	15	9	45	8	40	20
	B	2	10	9	45	9	45	20
VIth	G	3	15	13	65	4	20	20
	B	1	5	12	60	7	35	20
VIIIth	G	4	20	15	75	1	5	20
	B	3	15	14	70	3	15	20
Total	G	10	16	37	61,6	13	21,6	60
Overall	B	6	10	35	58,3	19	31,6	60

From Table 1, which reflects the degree of suggestibility among participants with intellectual disability, it emerges that in all three grades, girls display a higher level of suggestibility than boys. As age and grade level increase, the number of suggestible or highly suggestible participants rises for both sexes, while the proportion of those classified as non-suggestible decreases. Comparing participants across the three grades, a noticeable increase in the number of those who can be considered suggestible is observed in the 8th grade; overall, the total number of girls in this category is significantly higher than that of boys.

Table 2. Numerical and percentage distribution by gender of the degree of suggestibility in the typically developing group

Grade	Sex	Highly Suggestible		Suggestible		Non-Suggestible		Total
		no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	
IVth	G	5	25%	12	60%	3	15%	20
	B	3	15%	13	65%	4	20%	20
VIth	G	5	25%	14	70%	1	5%	20
	B	4	20%	14	70%	2	10%	20
VIIIth	G	6	30%	13	65%	1	5%	20
	B	5	25%	13	65%	2	10%	20
Total	G	16	26,66%	39	65%	5	8,33%	60
Overall	B	12	20%	40	66,66%	8	13,33%	60

Table 2, referring to the typically developing participants, highlights relatively similar characteristics. Here as well, the number of girls in the categories of highly suggestible and suggestible is higher than that of boys, and there is a slight increase in the number of non-suggestible boys. It should be noted that among typically developing participants, there is a significant decrease (for both sexes) in those classified as non-suggestible compared to the group with intellectual disability. This finding supports the idea that a higher level of intellectual development facilitates an increase in the degree of suggestibility.

On the other hand, the larger number of girls in both groups who respond positively to suggestion brings to light two aspects: the first refers to a slight advance of girls over boys in terms of psychological (rather than physical) development at this age, and the second is related to sexual dimorphism, which produces differences in attitudinal change when confronted with a suggested task.

It is also noteworthy that the results obtained on the administered tasks correlate with the teachers' assessments and estimations, particularly those concerning learning capacities and motivation for activity in general.

We also found that both girls and boys in the highly suggestible category are more receptive to perceiving the anxiety-provoking situations included in the experiment and display clearly manifested anxious behavior, to an equal extent, both in the classroom and during free activities. Participants in the suggestible category exhibit a lower level of anxiety, often masked by the suppression of the fear emotion that generates it. As a result, their behaviors are hesitant and their verbal responses are delayed.

Whereas in highly suggestible participants the anxious state is accompanied by psychomotor agitation, clumsiness, grimacing, verbalization, and precipitated speech, in suggestible participants these manifestations are reduced; they appear more controlled and respond more attentively to emerging situations. In non-suggestible participants, indifference toward outcomes predominates; they do not mobilize themselves to accomplish the given task and are

predominantly inhibited. They are not anxious, do not experience unpleasant or dangerous situations intensely, do not cooperate with peers, and are less sensitive.

Based on the above, one might be led to assume that individuals with heightened suggestibility, coupled with anxiety, are advantaged in the development of certain personality traits. Certainly, when the degree of suggestibility is moderate, and anxiety is not so strong as to disorganize the individual's life, positive influences are more readily received, and an appropriate motivation for activity is more easily established. Hence, there is a clear need to understand such characteristics, which can be of real value in the instructional–educational process aimed at shaping the personality of both typically developing students and those experiencing difficulties.

By focusing on the qualitative aspects of responses to the situations included in the administered tasks, it can be observed that, in our study, the weakest results were obtained at the extremes—namely, by students in the highly suggestible category and by those in the non-suggestible category. The former worked hastily and did not reflect sufficiently before formulating a response or proposing a solution to a problem, while the latter were disinterested and did not display clearly defined interests in the activity.

When correlating suggestibility characteristics with the personality traits described by teachers, it becomes evident that negative traits and certain behavioral disturbances predominate among students in the highly suggestible category. Thus, highly suggestible students with intellectual disability, in addition to elevated levels of anxiety and frustration, are lacking in self-confidence, agitated and excitable, irritable and fearful; they avoid difficulties, accept and adopt others' ideas uncritically, are particularly susceptible to influence, underestimate themselves and their activity, readily accept the tutelage of those around them, and may exhibit aberrant behaviors under negative influences.

Participants classified as non-suggestible are indifferent and inhibited, careless and unconcerned with activity outcomes; they fail to recognize their own potential and make little effort to complete tasks, show low receptivity to influence, and have reduced sensitivity. They are negligent in appearance and in verbal expression, which often turns into a form of logorrhea; they tend to fall closer to the lower limit of mild intellectual disability and display pronounced rigidity in thinking. They are emotionally labile at the level of personality, shifting easily from one affective state to another.

Superior qualities are observed in participants belonging to the suggestible category. They engage more actively in tasks and strive to achieve the best possible results, are strongly motivated by success and seek to please those around them, are sensitive and consistently display a surplus of activity, feel the need for social affiliation, and attempt to cooperate as effectively as possible. They are confident and sociable, have high verbal fluency and knowledge appropriate to the curriculum, and show stronger interests in learning, activities, and aspirations that may even exceed their actual possibilities of achievement. Their anxiety is temporary and becomes more pronounced in conflict situations; they are capable of concentrating on tasks and overcoming frustrating situations more easily when engaged in work they perceive as useful, among other characteristics.

Among participants with typical intellectual functioning who were classified into the two categories—highly suggestible and non-suggestible—although the phenomena identified in individuals with intellectual disability are also present, they are considerably reduced in both extent and depth. Anxious states do not disorganize the capacity to analyze the situation, allowing these individuals to relate more accurately to their own abilities and to their ways of interacting with others. Those classified as suggestible are behaviorally balanced, manage to control their anxious states, and, in their verbal responses, even when they accept the experimenter's suggestion, attempt to provide arguments and simultaneously express previously acquired knowledge.

The frequent incidence of anxiety states, particularly in individuals with intellectual disability, is facilitated by both endogenous and exogenous factors that are significant for the etiopathogenesis of the overall impairments that may occur in a given case. Endogenous factors play a predisposing role in anxiety disorders, while exogenous factors have a strong disabling potential. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between internal and external factors, since internal conditions must be understood in relation to changes in reactivity resulting from the repeated and prolonged action of psychotraumatic situations such as conflicts, frustrations, and stresses generated by the environment in which the individual lives.

Therefore, anxiety disorders of varying intensity depend on the internal and external conditions specific to each individual, and any analysis must take into account the biological, psychological, and sociocultural framework within which personality develops and evolves. The perception of stress, frustration, and conflict generates affective tension, the intensity of which depends less on the nature of these factors and more on the level of affective maturation and the ethical–behavioral constituents that encompass psychological capacities, professional skills, aspirations, and interests, as well as social adaptation and integration.

In the two play activities, participants in the highly suggestible category accepted the suggestive situations without any reservations, and when an element eliciting feelings of frustration and emotional–anxious experiences was introduced, they reacted with agitated behavior that was incongruent with the respective stimuli. By accepting the suggestive situations—even when these contradicted the knowledge they already possessed—the participants adapted to the model and modified their behavior according to variations in the stimulus situation. They did not deliberate on the situation and adopted exactly what was suggested to them; consequently, their responses fell into the category of puerility and infantilism.

When the suggestive situation was accompanied by the induction of an anxious state, they became nervous, excitable, suspicious, and fearful, and displayed evident physiological reactions such as profuse sweating, flushing of the cheeks, congestion, frequent requests to use the restroom, crying accompanied by generalized trembling, and similar manifestations. Participants in the suggestible category, although exhibiting relatively similar reactions, did so with much lower intensity, and these reactions did not disorganize their behavior.

In the case of stimulus situations that appeared to contradict what they already knew, typically developing participants voiced mild objections and requested additional clarification regarding the behavior they were expected to adopt. They showed moments of deliberation, and some even partially modified the situation; however, this modification did not essentially alter their acceptance of the experimenter’s suggestion. A slight emotion of fear was evident, related to the perceived effectiveness of their behavior in completing the play activity.

In the sentence-completion task and in solving mathematical exercises, students were given incorrect solution strategies. All highly suggestible participants accepted the suggested solutions, justifying their responses with statements such as “because you said so,” even though they knew the correct solution. Those in the suggestible category either solved the task correctly at first and then erased their answer to adopt the suggested solution, or stated “this is not right,” but, receiving no feedback, eventually accepted the experimenter’s suggestion. Students in the 6th grade, and especially those in the 8th grade, later made disapproving comments about the experimenter and expressed dissatisfaction with the way they had solved the problem.

After listening to the story (*The Goat and Her Three Kids*), highly suggestible and suggestible students showed reactions of non-acceptance of the anxiety-provoking situation; they became sad and displayed signs of impatience. When asked to retell the story, they participated enthusiastically, adopting the ending suggested by the experimenter, but avoided the anxiety-provoking situation either through interruptions, blockages, and inhibitions or by recounting the story as it was originally learned, disregarding the elements introduced in the experimental condition.

It can be stated that the suggestion was fully accepted by participants as long as it did not generate feelings of frustration capable of triggering an anxious state, and that the capacity to receive influences increases with age and with the ability to understand causal motivations. In certain situations, participants with difficulties in the domain of thinking displayed unusual reactions: prolonged and senseless resistance to logical arguments, an uncritical tendency to act in the opposite manner to what was requested. These characteristics represent expressions of personality immaturity (1979).

Non-suggestible students with intellectual disability remained passive in the face of the suggested situations, being dominated by stereotyped responses and behaviors, which indicates limited capacities for understanding and adaptation. With a poor vocabulary, they are unable to produce a coherent retelling of a story; most often, it takes the form of a mere succession of words, with frequent gaps in relation to the learned content. Generally poorly motivated for activity, they make little effort and are indifferent to teachers' evaluations, insensitive to those around them, egocentric, and lacking initiative. They display behaviors that are incongruent with those of their peers who are also low achievers and have an IQ that places them closer to the category of individuals with intellectual disability.

They are not aware of the relationship between stimulus characteristics and the intensity of anxiety. In order to understand their inner experiences, the variability of the stimulus situation must first be taken into account, and only then can the prediction of the anxious reaction be assessed. In these cases, internal stimuli do not generate anxiety; rather, anxiety is triggered only by external situations that produce a momentary emotional shock, experienced unpredictably from one period to another. Such exacerbations and fluctuations of emotional experiences confer a random characteristic on the behavior of individuals with intellectual disability.

The intense emotion of fear that frequently generates anxiety is structured in the form of defense-aggression strategies or flight and uncontrollable crying. In such cases, the dichotomy—*anxiety disorders versus behavioral disorders*—is merely conventional, as they constitute a unified whole of personality disturbances.

Suggestible individuals with intellectual disability typically present mild forms of intellectual disability and are capable of a relative awareness of teachers' evaluations and of how they are perceived by them. They are interested in making a good impression and proving sensitive to adults' esteem and demands. When they seek to avoid punishment, reproach, or emotional coldness, they adopt strategies of evasion and lying. Such deliberate evasive behaviors are also grounded in the fact that affectivity, voluntary action, and the capacity for self-regulation become more controlled.

However, the excessive masking and overcontrol of anxiety lead to nervousness, irritability, feelings of fear, tics, and sleep disturbances, all of which are rooted in the existence of conflictual states. These conflictual states most often emerge and are maintained within the family, in parent-child relationships. They intensify later on, when the child partially becomes aware of their disability in relation to the social status and roles they occupy—first in school, and subsequently in everyday and professional life.

Conclusion

According to data reported by R. Perron (1979), school status exerts a direct influence on the valorization of self-representation: devaluation is greater among students with intellectual disability who are not enrolled in special education and lower among those who live in a protected environment. However, school life also brings about new experiences for the individual with intellectual disability, which can substantially modify behavior; these experiences relate to success, failure, conflict, anxiety, frustration, and self-esteem in relation to the educator's evaluation.

In this way, the affective axis becomes more nuanced and increasingly connected to social resonance, latent contact with individuals outside the family and school, adult behavioral models, as well as the peer group to which the individual belongs. The affective availability of the individual with intellectual disability shapes a specific attitude toward teachers, grounded in the capacity for reception and intuitive-empathic integration. Even if they experience certain difficulties in the domains of thinking and learning, students who fall within the range of typical intellectual functioning manage to overcome the anxious and frustrating elements induced in experimental situations by adopting evasive behaviors and by attempting to find motivations for accepting suggestions that contradict the knowledge they possess. When the living environment is favorable, the self-image formed by the individual helps them to adequately assess their own potential in relation to environmental conditions.

The persistence of frustration within an unfavorable educational environment leads to a diversification of conflicts and intensifies the state of anxiety. All these characteristics give rise to phenomena of depersonalization and to behavioral disorders of the type described in one of our previous studies (E. Verza, 1983).

Correlating the data obtained in our study with the personality traits inventoried by teachers shows that, among participants in the highly suggestible and suggestible categories in whom anxiety was also strongly manifested, the following were evident: affective tension, hostility toward others, nervous symptomatology, psychomotor agitation, depression, withdrawal into the self, lying, truancy, emotional lability, underestimation of the self, fragility of personality, and similar features. These characteristics can be diminished or attenuated if effective and positive intervention is undertaken, through the creation of secure relationships that foster motivation for activity and the experience of affective comfort.

From this perspective, the importance of suggestibility and anxiety in the construction of personality traits becomes evident, as does their determining relationship with personality type and with the individual's adaptation to a higher or lower level of suggestibility and anxiety—thus validating the second presumption formulated. The socialization of needs, motives, and aspirations can be understood by considering the stage-like character of the development of the motivational-affective sphere (E. Verza & F. E. Verza, 2000).

Since suggestibility and anxiety are closely linked to the development of motivation and affectivity, and since they themselves follow a stage-like course of development—just as the entire psychological evolution shapes personality and behavior by hierarchizing them along a scale of adaptation to the socio-cultural environment—the individual's personality cannot remain outside the influence of the experiences and emotions generated by various situations, which are amplified or diminished by the level of suggestibility and anxiety.

At the same time, within this context, the determining role of personality itself cannot be overlooked, in the sense that a certain personality typology may facilitate or, conversely, attenuate increases or decreases in suggestibility and anxiety across the events experienced by the individual. Of importance here are biogenetic-hereditary factors as well as psycho-social, educational, and environmental factors, which shape the direction of the development of personality traits.

The existence of suggestibility within certain limits allows for the creation of a broad field of action necessary for educational and remedial-compensatory influences aimed at contributing to the structuring of positive personality traits. We found that decreases or increases in suggestibility and anxiety depend both on objective factors—such as the context in which the experiment or task takes place and the potential consequences anticipated by the subject—and on subjective factors related to intellectual capacity, attention, the personal significance of the event, motivation and interest in the stimulus, as well as whether the subject is tense or relaxed, anxious or optimistic, and so forth.

Although these two categories of factors cannot be clearly separated, psychological approaches based on suggestive influences capitalize—depending on the situation and the individual's psychological structures—sometimes on one, sometimes on another of the factors mentioned;

however, success can be ensured only by taking all of them into account. Such an approach has been extensively analyzed in another of our works (E. Verza, 1989).

By elucidating the specific laws governing the formation and development of personality, the psychologist can design intervention programs aimed at maximizing the influence of random variables that shape immature and disharmonious personalities, while facilitating the action of controllable variables that sustain mature, harmonious personalities, so that the resulting behaviors ensure a broad field of social integration and adaptation. The basic psychological structures that directly underlie personality are the temperamental and characterological ones—relatively stable structures that signify modes of reaction to concrete situations.

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