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Ontogenesis of the kiss: An exploratory analysis

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Abstract

The study presents an exploratory investigation of the function of the kiss and is aimed at validating a quantitative psychological instrument useful to highlight its ontogenesis. The construction of the questionnaire identified 25 possible items with the aim of analysing the origin of the meaning processes related to kiss, starting from the relationships with the main caregivers. In this sense, the items were constituted starting from the subject's representations regarding parental desires, to move to secondary relationships and to the introduction of the term "third" in their dynamics of affectivity projection. The study involved 227 subjects with a male prevalence (M=53,3%) and aged between 18 and 42 years old (Mean= 23,84; SD= 3,47). The weight of such items demonstrated to be representative of the kissing experiences along the psycho-affective development stages were reported. Through the factorial exploratory analysis, three factors were identified, called respectively "kiss desire origin", "Objectual kiss" and "Thirdness".

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1. Introduction

Over time, humans perfected the ability to communicate emotions and desires through increasingly complex ways, differentiating themselves from other species. In this sense, the mouth constitutes a complexity of organs with energetic and libidinal functions, through the kiss it becomes the vehicle useful to establish an emotional contact with the external world. From the first months of life, the primary pleasure experiences are related to the oral cavity: the child instinctively brings everything to the mouth, establishing contact with the maternal breast, the main source of nutrition and care (Freud, 1905). The innate sucking reflex is the ontogenetic premise of the kiss.

Some examples of the above-mentioned functions are explained in the studies by Morris (1997), so that the origin of the act can be traced back to the mother, who originally weaned children through chewing and the subsequent passage of masticated food. The meaning of the kiss could therefore be related to the possibility of providing a form of archaic gratification, from a nutritional to an affective meaning. Lovers through the contact of the lips find a symbolic nourishment, able to strengthen their intimacy and their emotional relation. The importance of the mother's role in the construction of the ontogenetic promise of the kiss was highlighted by Güntürkün (2003), who showed that during the act of kissing, subjects have the tendency to incline their head to the right. This behaviour seems to find an explanation for the care of mothers, who tend to rock their children up and to the left, forcing the child to turn to the right to be nourished and cuddled.

This result showed, the first step of an unconscious mechanism through which the subject learns to associate heat and safety with the gesture of leaning towards their side. The evolution of attachment theory takes on prominence here: the guarantee of a secure emotional basis in childhood facilitates the development of protection and empathy, considered as important relational bases (Steele, Steele, & Croft, 2008). The paternal figure plays a fundamental role in supporting the development of the child, representing in the Lacanian approach that necessary and impossible weaning of the infant from the breast and vice versa of the mother from the mouth of the infant (Luquet-Parat, 2018). The role of the father becomes central as a modulator of the mother-child separation and guarantor of the passage from dyadic bonds to triadic bonds. The male figure can be considered central to the development of a sense of stability and security, as demonstrated by a study by Khaleque and Rohner (2012). The authors discovered that children in response to the parent rejection, not only tend to feel more anxious and insecure but are also more hostile and aggressive towards others. The pain of rejection tends to recur in adulthood, making it more difficult to establish trusting relationships with partners. The care received by the primary figures is therefore the precursor of a sense of relational intimacy, protection and trust, the kiss represents only the final act.

According to Darwinian perspective, the kiss actually reflects the innate desire to be recognized and to establish a relationship, in order to enjoy mutual contact (Darwin & Prodger, 1998). It is able to promote trust, physical and emotional closeness between the subjects. Recent research has indeed shown that the kiss does not appear to be an integral part of sexual activities where high intimacy is not present, since its primary function would be to nurture romantic relationships strengthening the bonds of attachment (Fisher, 2004). The number of kisses reported among the partners also seems to be directly proportional to the value and satisfaction of the relationship and this discovery gives the kiss the role of "emotional barometer" (Brewis & Linstead, 2003; Gullede, Gullede & Stahmann, 2003).

Neurobiological research has recently reduced the role of passion and sentiment connected related to kiss, conceiving it as the mouth-to-mouth orientation of two individuals or the pressure of one person's lips against those of another (Kirshenbaum, 2011). It is meant as a real exchange of sensory information accompanied by chemical reactions such as the release of dopamine and serotonin, inducing exaltation, euphoria and a natural sense of well-being (Fisher, Aron, & Brown, 2005). The studies also focused on the physiological aspects, as the function of selecting the partner with purely reproductive purposes. In this perspective its importance, particularly for women, is related to the ability to transmit information about the genetic compatibility of a potential companion (Huges, Harrison, & Gallup, 2007). Significant gender differences also emerged in reference to the value attributed to the very act of the kiss: in fact, women understand it as an emblem of emotional involvement while men as a sexual preliminary (Ebberfeld, 2009; Wlodarski & Dunbar, 2013).

On the basis of the studies, it seems that the kiss has two main functions: in short-term relationships it represents a powerful act for selecting the sexual partner, through the exchange of neural and chemical messages; in long-term relationships, on the other hand, it would be an expression of psychological closeness and a means to preserve and improve feelings of intimacy. The role of caregivers and in particular of the mother, seems fundamental in constituting the ontogenetic premise despite, as stated by Walter (2006) the kiss resists any form of scientific dissection and its apparently simple origin hides unexpected complexity requiring further investigation. The present study is aimed at exploring variables useful for the comprehension of the relevance of kissing, in psychological and integrative terms, of the experience for the psycho-affective development of the subject.

2. Method

The composition of the items took into account the different meanings of the kiss, in the different phases of psycho-affective development. In this sense, starting from the subject's representations about the attitudes of family members towards himself, the affective dynamics of kissing configured in terms of learning emotional expression were included. The items were produced with reference to primary care dynamics, integration of secondary caregivers and extended figures in emotional and libidinal terms. The interest has turned to the expression of dynamic variations in the phases of psycho-affective development, with particular reference to self-perception with respect to the experience of the kiss.

The original and relational meaning of the kiss were also considered in order to obtain a general overview.

The observation group is composed of 227 subjects, with male prevalence (M= 53,3%) aged between 18 and 42 years old (Mean= 23,84; SD= 3,47). The initial composition of the items presented in Appendix A, was composed of 25 items, which included a 4-point Likert scale. The reduction and factorialization process were achieved through a factorial analysis with Rotation Method Quartimax with Kaiser Normalization. Appendix B contains the items whose weight was significant.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 24.0 for Window package.

3. Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for study variables

| | MEAN | SD |
|----|------|------|
| 1 | 3.37 | .943 |
| 2 | 3.47 | .899 |
| 3 | 1.19 | .662 |
| 4 | 1.18 | .606 |
| 5 | 3.58 | .823 |
| 6 | 3.21 | .915 |
| 7 | 3.27 | .915 |
| 8 | 3.04 | 1.02 |
| 9 | 3.37 | .894 |
| 10 | 3.22 | .952 |
| 11 | 3.51 | .783 |
| 12 | 2.62 | 1.02 |
| 13 | 2.15 | 1.12 |
| 14 | 2.59 | 1.20 |
| 15 | 1.84 | 1.05 |
| 16 | 2.19 | 1.12 |
| 17 | 3.23 | 1.01 |
| 18 | 2.67 | 1.07 |
| 19 | 1.76 | .995 |
| 20 | 1.40 | .777 |
| 21 | 2.92 | .963 |
| 22 | 3.06 | 1.03 |
| 23 | 1.33 | .711 |
| 24 | 1.35 | .740 |
| 25 | 3.42 | .906 |

The Kaiser Meyer-Oklin Measure of Sampling Adequacy reported 0,724 (Best > 0,600). The Principal component analysis produced the following data: Factor 1 = 0. ,7 21, Factor 2 = 0. ,501, and Factor 3 = 0. ,478. The explorative analysis highlighted three main factors, explaining the 48,24% of variance, respectively Factor 1= 18,671, Factor 2= 15,26 and Factor 3= 14,31.

Table 2. Items weight and factors

| | FACTOR 1 | FACTOR 2 | FACTOR 3 |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 | .245 | .180 | .186 |
| 2 | .435 | .259 | -.052 |
| 3 | .018 | .009 | -.077 |
| 4 | -.066 | .012 | .047 |
| 5 | .439 | .325 | .075 |
| 6 | .236 | .027 | .704 |
| 7 | .721 | .007 | .297 |
| 8 | .174 | .104 | .827 |
| 9 | .803 | .096 | .215 |
| 10 | .184 | .099 | .793 |
| 11 | .834 | .146 | .082 |
| 12 | .407 | .129 | .392 |
| 13 | -.001 | -.006 | .339 |
| 14 | .298 | -.024 | -.003 |
| 15 | -.085 | .140 | .248 |
| 16 | .026 | .101 | .040 |
| 17 | .117 | .804 | .093 |
| 18 | .039 | .637 | -.014 |
| 19 | .003 | .067 | .037 |
| 20 | -.060 | .050 | .084 |
| 21 | -.068 | .632 | .206 |
| 22 | .211 | .655 | -.158 |
| 23 | .086 | .129 | -.032 |
| 24 | -.011 | .044 | .003 |
| 25 | .093 | .537 | .118 |

The first factor was called “kiss desire origin”, composed by the items 2, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12. The name of this factor depends on the meaning related to the items, referring to the first phase of life.

For this reason, the name of the first factor summarizes the provenience and the deep meaning of being cared for the early life stage. The second factor was called “objectual kiss”, composed by the items 15, 16, 19, 20, 25.

Its name is due to the meaning of the objectual relations, so that how it is known, the relations related to different secondary psychic objects starts to have a different sense and weight for the subject. The extension of the relational and affective meaning of kiss, is represented by the meaning of the items contained within this factor. The last factor was called “Thirdness”, its meaning is related to the necessity for the subject to project affectivity on other psychic objects and to establish relations far from the familiar nucleus. This third factor was composed by the items 6, 8 and 10.

4. Discussion

The results obtained on the base of on the items give the scale a congruence with the theoretical reference themes. In particular, it is noteworthy the succession of the figures related to the psycho-affective dynamics. The premise for a typical neuro-development is due to different figures, taking into account scientific research evidence the first dynamics of caregiving make the difference.

Specifically, the first caregiving figure emerged as relevant in conjunction with the subject’s representations about parental desire. The first factor represents a fundamental step, in relation to the typical and pathological dynamics that affect the development of the subject (Verrocchio, Backer, & Marchetti, 2018; Falgares et al., 2018).

One of the particular needs expressed by this study refers to the need for continuity between evolutionary, neuropsychological and psychodynamic features. The work of Kaplan-Solms and Solms (2005) is a full example of this integrative perspective. It represents a useful point of view for understanding the deep and the unconscious representations. The work of structuring the items took into account these bases, considering the need to overcome those splits that distance knowledge from the integrity of the subject (Damasio, 1995; Motofei & Rowland, 2015, 2018; Solms, Turnbull, & Clarici, 2007).

The continuity is therefore addressed to libidinal structures (Motofei & Rowland, 2016), considering all the outcomes due to the presence of psychopathological and medical conditions (Dell’Osso et al., 2012; Martino et al., 2019; Settineri, Frisone, Merlo, Geraci, & Martino, 2019).

What emerges about the object relations refers to the acquisition of the consequent caregivers. The acquisition of secondary figures is a subsequent phase of psycho-affective development, characterized by a function of regulation and separation from the primary figure.

The process of linking emotions and representation, as for their management, is fundamental along the life span.

The defensive dynamics during the developmental phases represent the first step for future management. The role of the kiss may be considered as an embodied experience not free from the frustration of desire, for which defensive dynamics are useful for the management of affective dynamics and unconscious representations (Settineri et al., 2019; Settineri, Frisone, Alibrandi, & Merlo, 2019a, 2019b).

The third dimension explored refers to the introduction of a "third" term within relational dynamics. A representational example refers to the concept of thirdness introduced by C.S. Peirce (1931), for which a symbolic elaboration foresees the full acquisition of a third subject, useful for the completion of object maturation (Settineri, Merlo, Turiaco, & Merlo, 2017). The dynamics of the third, are well known and considered by the works of J. Lacan in 1960, between 1968 and 1971, between 1972 and 1974 and from 1976 to 1977. Our experience is meant as a preliminary work of validation of this scale, so that the above-mentioned contributions may be referred to current and future research. However, further studies are needed in order to implement knowledge and experimentation of the emerged dynamics.

Appendix A*Italian 25 Items version*

1. Lei è stato un figlio desiderato da suo padre?
2. Lei è stato un figlio desiderato da sua madre?
3. Pensa che la sua nascita sia stata motivo di contrasto in famiglia per suo padre?
4. Pensa che la sua nascita sia stata motivo di conflitto in famiglia per sua madre?
5. Sua madre si occupava personalmente della sua alimentazione e della cura personale?
6. Suo padre giocava con lei?
7. Sua madre giocava con lei?
8. Veniva incoraggiato/a da suo padre ad espressioni di affetto?
9. Veniva incoraggiato/a da sua madre ad espressioni di affetto?
10. Suo padre le dava dei baci?
11. Sua madre le dava dei baci?
12. I suoi genitori si scambiavano manifestazioni di affetto in sua presenza?
13. È stato mai aiutato da suo padre a superare le prime delusioni sentimentali?
14. È stato mai aiutato da sua madre a superare le prime delusioni sentimentali?
15. Ha mai ricevuto informazioni da suo padre sul bacio e su eventuali pericoli infettivi?
16. Ha mai ricevuto informazioni da sua madre sul bacio e su eventuali pericoli infettivi?
17. Ricorda il suo primo bacio?
18. Definirebbe gratificante l'esperienza del suo primo bacio?
19. L'esperienza del primo bacio le ha inizialmente suscitato angoscia?
20. Ha provato sensazioni di disgusto nell'atto del primo bacio?
21. Ha provato la sensazione di sentirsi desiderato/a prima del bacio?
22. Pensa che il bacio possa contribuire alla durata della relazione amorosa?
23. Ha avuto difficoltà nel bacio a causa dell'eventuale presenza dell'apparecchio o di una malformazione, patologia alla bocca?
24. L'aspetto dei suoi denti ha influito sull'esperienza del primo bacio?
25. Pensa che la salute orale in generale incida sulla qualità del bacio?

English 25 items version

1. Were you a wanted child by your father?
2. Were you a wanted child by your mother?
3. Do you think your birth was a source of conflict in the family for your father?
4. Do you think your birth was a source of conflict in the family for your mother?
5. Did your mother personally take care of your diet and personal care?
6. Did your father play with you?
7. Did your mother play with you?
8. Were you encouraged by your father with emotional expressions?
9. Were you encouraged by your mother with emotional expressions?
10. Did your father use to kiss you?
11. Did your mother use to kiss you?
12. Did your parents display affection manifestations in your presence?
13. Have you ever been helped by your father to overcome the first sentimental disappointments?
14. Have you ever been helped by your mother to overcome the first sentimental disappointments?
15. Have you ever received information from your father about the kiss and any infectious dangers?
16. Have you ever received information from your mother about the kiss and any infectious dangers?
17. Do you remember your first kiss?
18. Would you define the experience of your first kiss as gratifying?
19. Did the experience of the first kiss initially arouse anxiety?
20. Did you experience disgust during your first kiss?
21. Had you felt the sensation of being desired before kissing?
22. Do you think the kiss can contribute to the duration of the love relationship?
23. Did you have difficulty during kissing due to the presence of braces or malformation and mouth diseases?
24. Did the appearance of your teeth affect your first kiss?
25. Do you think oral health generally affects the quality of the kiss?

Appendix B*Significant weight items – Italian version*

- Lei è stato un figlio desiderato da sua madre?
- Sua madre si occupava personalmente della sua alimentazione e della cura personale?
- Suo padre giocava con lei?
- Sua madre giocava con lei?
- Veniva incoraggiato/a da suo padre ad espressioni di affetto?
- Veniva incoraggiato/a da sua madre ad espressioni di affetto?
- Suo padre le dava dei baci?
- Sua madre le dava dei baci?
- I suoi genitori si scambiavano manifestazioni di affetto in sua presenza?
- Ricorda il suo primo bacio?
- Definirebbe gratificante l'esperienza del suo primo bacio?
- Ha provato la sensazione di sentirsi desiderato/a prima del bacio?
- Pensa che il bacio possa contribuire alla durata della relazione amorosa?
- Pensa che la salute orale in generale incida sulla qualità del bacio?

Significant weight items - English version

- Were you a wanted child by your mother?
- Did your mother personally take care of your diet and personal care?
- Did your father play with you?
- Did your mother play with you?
- Were you encouraged by your father with emotional expressions?
- Were you encouraged by your mother with emotional expressions?
- Did your father use to kiss you?
- Did your mother use to kiss you?
- Did your parents display affection manifestations in your presence?
- Do you remember your first kiss?
- Would you define the experience of your first kiss as gratifying?
- Had you felt the sensation of being desired before kissing?
- Do you think the kiss can contribute to the duration of the love relationship?
- Do you think oral health generally affects the quality of the kiss?

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