

# Assessment by Pupils, Teachers and Parents of School Coexistence Problems in Spain, France, Austria and Hungary: Global Psychometric Data

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to analyze school coexistence in different European countries. A total of 2,196 pupils, teachers and parents from Spain, France, Austria and Hungary participated by filling out a school coexistence questionnaire, translated into the corresponding languages. The results obtained indicate a greater prevalence of school conflict in France and Austria, being lower in Spain and lower still in Hungary. It is also found that teachers' perception of coexistence problems is different from that of pupils. Teachers perceive as more frequent "serious" problems of coexistence (related to drug abuse, presence of aggressive objects or intercultural problems), while pupils score as more frequent "milder" coexistence problems. The results also indicate a differentiation between two types of conflict as important aspects of coexistence: on the one hand, conflicts involving aggression; and on the other, general apathy and disaffection at the school.

*Key words: Abuse, bullying, school coexistence, adolescence.*

## RESUMEN

*Evaluación por parte de los alumnos, profesores y familiares de los problemas de convivencia escolar en España, Francia, Austria y Hungría: datos psicométricos globales.* El objetivo del presente estudio se centró en analizar la convivencia en centros escolares de distintos países europeos. En total, han participado 2.196 alumnos, profesores y familiares de España, Francia, Austria y Hungría que han contestado a un cuestionario de convivencia escolar, traducido a los diferentes idiomas de esos países. Los resultados obtenidos señalan una prevalencia mayor de conflictos escolares en Francia y Austria, siendo inferior en España y sobre todo en Hungría. También se encuentra que la percepción de los profesores de los problemas de convivencia es diferente a los alumnos. Los profesores puntúan como más frecuentes problemas de convivencia "graves" (que tienen que ver con el consumo de drogas, la presencia de objetos físicos de agresión o problemas interculturales), mientras que los alumnos puntúan con mayor frecuencia problemas

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“menores” de convivencia. Los resultados también señalan la diferenciación de dos tipos de conflictos como aspectos importantes de la convivencia, por una parte los conflictos de agresión; y por otra, la desmotivación general en el centro.

*Palabras clave: abuso, bullying, convivencia escolar, adolescencia.*

An aspect that is causing increasing concern in our society is the coexistence of pupils in schools. This is an important aspect not only for the educational community, but has become an issue of great public interest due to the attention of the mass media. It is undoubtedly the case that the relationship between the different agents of the school environment have undergone profound changes, so that there are problems for coexistence not only between peers (pupil-pupil), but also between pupils and teachers, and even in relation to the use of common property (facilities, school material, etc.).

The point is that although conflict in schools is not a new phenomenon, there is indeed more interest in it today, with programmes focusing on its prevention or treatment under way in several institutions (e.g., Garaigordobil, 2002; Olweus, 1993; Ortega, 1997; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Moreover, it appears to be gradually on the increase (Carney & Merrel, 2001).

Within the field of school coexistence it is necessary to consider not only violence or abuse between peers (bullying), but also aspects such as academic failure or poor performance, relations with the teaching staff and general apathy and disaffection among pupils.

As far as research into classroom violence is concerned, the first studies were carried out in Scandinavian countries at the end of the 1970s, with interest in this area gradually spreading to the majority of Western countries (e.g., Mooij, 1994; Mellor, 1990; O'Moore, Kirkham & Smith, 1996; Fonzi, Genta, Menesini, Bacchini, Bonino & Costabile, 1999; Spanish People's Ombudsman's Report, 2000; Alsaker & Brunner, 1999; Mombuso, 1994; Rigby, 1997). *Bullying* is usually defined as repeated aggressive or abusive behaviour among pupils. It can manifest itself in different forms, such as physical aggression, social exclusion, insults or gestures. Thus, it includes both direct forms (physical aggression, insults, etc.) and indirect forms (social exclusion, ostracism, malicious rumours, etc.). It generally has a series of consequences for victims, such as social isolation, poor academic results, depression, low self-esteem, and so on; it can also be a predictor of the subsequent emergence of aggressive behaviours, substance abuse or other behavioural problems in the aggressor (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

Prevalence rates indicate that at least 15-20% of pupils experience some type of bullying during their school life (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Cerezo & Ato, 2005; Olweus, 1985; Whitney & Smith, 1993). In this regard, Olweus (1999), in one of the most representative studies, with a sample of 130,000 school students, found that: (a) 9% of pupils were victims, 7% were aggressors, and 1.6% had been at some time involved as aggressors and as victims, (b) 5% of pupils were involved in more serious abuse (strong or intense victimization), whose frequency was one violent or abusive act per week, (c) Percentages of pupils who reported being victims decreased (in both boys and girls) with increasing age, (d) The youngest and weakest were the most vulnerable to

victimization, (e) Both aggressors and victims were much more likely to be male, (f) There were fewer instances of physical aggression in higher academic years than in lower ones, and (g) Aggressive acts tended to be carried out by colleagues from the same school year or higher years. This trend in the results has also been found in later studies (e.g., Byrne, 1994; Genta *et al.*, 1996; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

However, a problem faced by research on this phenomenon is that there is a scarcity of standardized instruments (Giordano & Schwiebert, 1997); moreover, many of the studies carried out are difficult to compare with one another, since they use different definitions and assessment methods (Crothers & Levinson, 2004). Also, the perception of the problem may vary depending on the agent evaluating it. Indeed, there may be very little in common between the different appreciation of the problem, or different level of concern over it, among teachers, among pupils, and among parents or other family members (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Tomada & Schwartzman, 1997). Likewise the way coexistence problems are viewed will vary depending on whether one is simply an observer or actually involved in them.

Thus, the present study had three main objectives. First of all, to measure school coexistence in different European countries by means of a single instrument. Second, to examine the perception of school coexistence problems by pupils, teachers and parents. And finally, to analyze the information from these agents, as both observers of the problem and as people directly involved in it.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample was made up of pupils, their parents and their teachers from Austria, Spain, France and Hungary. In France only pupils participated, so that there is no data from teachers or families. The number of schools participating were 10 in Spain, 5 in France, 5 in Hungary and 5 in Austria. Mean age of pupils was 14.34 years (standard deviation 1.11). A total of 52.1% of the pupils were female and 47.9% were male. Table 1 shows age and sex of the pupils by country, with no significant differences between them.

*Table 1.* Sample of pupils according to country, age and sex.

	Spain			Hungary			France			Austria			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Mean age	14.60	14.61	14.60	14.00	14.00	14.00	14.40	14.56	14.50	13.87	13.72	13.80	14.35	14.33	14.34
S.D.	1.27	1.27	1.27	-	-	-	1.01	1.36	1.23	0.76	0.71	0.74	1.11	1.12	1.11
N	446	428	874	97	174	271	70	103	173	167	144	311	780	849	1629

### *Instruments*

*Questionnaire on Problems in School Coexistence.* We adapted from Ortega and del Rey (2003) a questionnaire for application to pupils, teachers and parents. Twenty-six items were used to define 13 problematic situations of school coexistence, namely: (1) Confrontation between pupils and teachers, (2) Existence of clear norms of coexistence, (3) Bad language in class, (4) Insults between pupils, (5) Fights between pupils, (6) There are groups that do not get on, (7) Some children are “left out” and feel alone, (8) Teachers just teach, showing no concern or interest in coexistence aspects, (9) Pupils think the teachers do not understand them, (10) Pupils are apathetic and disaffected; they are bored, (11) Use or presence of aggressive objects, (12) Use or presence of drugs, (13) Problems of intercultural coexistence. For these 13 items, respondents were first required to rate the extent to which they perceived each problem to affect their school, on a response scale with four levels: (a) a lot (b) moderately (c) a little, and (d) not at all. The same 13 items were then repeated, with respondents required to indicate how far these situations affected them personally (in the case of pupils) or how far they affected their pupils and children (teachers and parents, respectively).

### *Procedure*

First of all, the above-mentioned questionnaire was translated into French, German and Hungarian, in order to apply it in the different countries, following the guidelines of Muñiz and Hambleton (1996). Once the instrument had been prepared, the Headteachers or Heads of Studies at the selected schools were contacted in order to obtain consent for application of the instrument during the following two weeks. One school was selected per province or region, depending on the political division of each country. Within a more comprehensive battery of tests, we applied the Questionnaire on Problems in School Coexistence. Total duration of the application of the tests was approximately 40 minutes.

## RESULTS

A total of 2196 participants responded to all the items of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha value for the full questionnaire (26 items) was 0.891. By sections, the subscale Problems Perceived at the School showed a value of 0.823, and the subscale Personal Repercussions, 0.851. Split by respondents and countries, all the values indicate that the questionnaire has acceptable consistency, with scores under 0.70 obtained only in the Austrian pupils, on the subscale Problems Perceived at the School (Cronbach's alpha= 0.697), and in the Hungarian teachers, on the subscale Personal Repercussions (Cronbach's alpha= 0.600). These results can be seen in Table 2.

In order to reveal the internal structure of the scale, we carried out a principal components analysis on the total sample. We first analyzed the plausibility of factor extraction by means of the Bartlett sphericity test, whose result ( $X^2(78) = 6463.338$ ,

Table 2. Reliability coefficients of the scale

Subscale: Problems Perceived at the School								
	Pupils		Parents		Teachers		Total	
	N	Alpha	N	Alpha	N	Alpha	N	Alpha
Austria	264	.697	102	.827	17	.809	383	.742
France	168	.751	-	-	-	-	168	.751
Hungary	257	.807	225	.845	127	.795	609	.786
Spain	666	.813	270	.859	100	.857	1036	.834
Total	1355	.800	597	.853	244	.831	2196	.823
Subscale: Personal Repercussions								
Austria	267	.774	96	.873	11	.744	374	.806
France	166	.840	-	-	-	-	166	.840
Hungary	262	.848	264	.768	127	.600	613	.755
Spain	793	.845	259	.875	91	.938	1143	.874
Total	1488	.849	579	.848	229	.846	2296	.851

$p = 0.000$ ) leaves the way clear to consider significant the correlations matrix, and therefore carry out the factor extraction. The variance explained by the different components was compared with that obtained in the parallel analysis of a random data matrix ( $N(0,1)$ ) with the same number of rows and columns as the matrix of observed data. Thirty random matrices were generated, being selected for comparison those in which the first factor obtained the greatest proportion of explained variance. For the subscale Problems Perceived at the School, only the eigenvalues of the first two factors were higher than the greatest eigenvalue expected by chance. In the Personal Repercussions subscale the figure was three. Thus, it was decided to retain the first two components, in the case of the first subscale, and the first three, in the case of the second subscale.

In order to proceed to the extraction of the components, we carried out a reduction of data by means of optimal scaling, quantifying the variables on the basis of an ordinal scale to obtain the dimensions that represent the greater part of the information found in the original variables. The components obtained were rotated using the Promax procedure, which permits the existence of non-null correlations between them, giving the oblique solution from a prior orthogonal solution. Table 3 shows the factor saturations of the configuration matrix (direct weights of each factor on each item) and the structure matrix (or correlations between each variable and the factor). For easier interpretation we eliminated the saturations under  $|0.40|$ , in line with the suggestions of Stevens (1992).

From these data, we find, as the first dimension of Problems Perceived at the School, "common" coexistence-related conflicts based on insults, fights and general apathy and disaffection among pupils. The second dimension refers to more "serious" problems related to the consumption or presence of drugs, the use or presence of

Table 3. Factor Saturations in the reduction of the dimensions of the scale

Subscale: Problems Perceived at the School						
	Configuration			Structure		
	1	2		1	2	
Insults between pupils	0.739			0.727		
Pupils think the teachers do not understand them	0.719			0.668		
The pupils are apathetic and disaffected	0.687			0.662		
There are groups that do not get on	0.654			0.641		
Fights between pupils	0.643			0.690		
Bad language in class	0.621			0.647		
Some children are "left out"	0.543			0.561		
Teachers just teach, showing no concern or interest in coexistence aspects	0.506			0.496		
Confrontation between pupils and teachers	0.482			0.543		
No clear norms of coexistence	0.420			0.449		
Use or presence of drugs		0.813			0.776	
Use or presence of aggressive objects		0.797			0.797	
Problems of intercultural coexistence		0.611			0.664	

  

Subscale: Personal Repercussions						
	Configuration			Structure		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Insults between pupils	0.908			0.838		
Fights between pupils	0.886			0.836		
Bad language in class	0.787			0.773		
There are groups that do not get on	0.687			0.691		
Confrontation between pupils and teachers	0.499			0.621		0.461
Some children are "left out"	0.484			0.608		0.439
No clear norms of coexistence	0.482			0.584		0.437
Use or presence of drugs		0.883			0.875	
Use or presence of aggressive objects		0.873			0.876	
Problems of intercultural coexistence		0.750			0.730	
Teachers just teach, showing no concern or interest in coexistence aspects			0.873			0.813
Pupils think the teachers do not understand them			0.828	0.449		0.836
The pupils are apathetic and disaffected			0.527	0.418		0.637

aggressive objects and problems of intercultural coexistence. As far as the Personal Repercussions subscale is concerned, the first dimension of "milder" conflicts is subdivided in two, one related to conflicts between pupils (insults, fights, unclear norms) and another associated with apathy and disaffection (Teachers just teach, showing no concern or interest in coexistence aspects, pupils think the teachers do not understand them, and

the pupils are apathetic and disaffected).The “serious” problems dimension remains unchanged in this subscale.

Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of these factors by country. For Problems Perceived at the School, significant differences were found between the means of the four countries in both dimensions (Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(3, 1065.4658) = 140.67$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for Factor 1, and Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(3, 861.356) = 20.98$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for Factor 2). Analyzing these global differences by pairs of countries through Dunnett’s C test, we find that the differences in the first factor are significant between all the pairs of countries, whilst in the second factor all the comparisons are significant except that between France and Spain. Hungary is, in both cases, the country with the lowest mean, the highest means being for France and Austria, with Spain close behind.

For the Personal Repercussions subscale, the means of the three factors show significant differences between the countries (Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(3, 850.373) = 125.94$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for the first factor, Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(3, 873.109) = 2.811$ ,  $p = 0.038$  for the second factor, and Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(3, 873.109) = 66.356$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for the third factor). In Factor 1 the differences found in all the pairwise comparisons are significant except that between France and Spain; in the second factor only the difference in the comparison between France and Hungary is significant, while in Factor 3 the differences between all the pairs of countries are significant, except between France and Austria and France and Spain.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the factors by countries

Subscale: Problems Perceived at the School							
		Factor 1 (range 10-40)		Factor 2 (range 3-12)			
Country	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Austria	383	26.21	4.968	5.56	2.148		
France	168	27.61	5.357	5.01	2.191		
Hungary	609	20.77	4.570	4.53	1.458		
Spain	1036	24.92	5.805	4.97	1.995		
Total	2196	24.20	5.768	4.95	1.936		

  

Subscale: Personal Repercussions							
		Factor 1 (range 7-28)		Factor 2 (range 3-12)		Factor 3 (range 3-12)	
Country	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Austria	374	17.54	4.623	5.39	2.160	6.90	2.192
France	166	15.52	5.268	5.02	2.543	6.78	2.573
Hungary	613	11.76	3.279	5.63	2.836	5.64	1.807
Spain	1143	14.83	5.425	5.55	2.881	7.26	2.599
Total	2296	14.50	5.159	5.51	2.743	6.73	2.439

As regards the comparison by different type of agent (pupils, parents, teachers), Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for both factors. For the first subscale, Problems Perceived at the School, we found significant differences between these means (Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(2, 1039.452) = 71.98$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for Factor 1, and Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(2, 1191.500) = 14.62$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for Factor 2). By means of post hoc tests carried out with Dunnett's C method, significant differences are revealed between the mean of Factor 1 for pupils compared to the other agents, and for the mean of Factor 2 in all the comparisons made.

Table 5. Means and standard deviations by agents involved

Subscale: Problems Perceived at the School					
		Factor 1 (range 10-40)		Factor 2 (range 3-12)	
Rol	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pupil	1355	25.31	5.525	4.97	2.025
Parents	597	22.42	5.881	4.72	1.815
Teachers	244	22.34	5.236	5.44	1.597
Total	2196	24.20	5.768	4.95	1.936

Subscale: Personal Repercussions							
		Factor 1 (range 7-28)		Factor 2 (range 3-12)		Factor 3 (range 3-12)	
Agent	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Pupils	1488	15.14	5.171	5.26	2.599	7.05	2.468
Parents	579	12.74	4.607	4.79	1.940	5.84	2.291
Teachers	229	14.79	5.395	8.90	2.975	6.93	2.029
Total	2296	14.50	5.159	5.51	2.743	6.73	2.439

For the Personal Repercussions subscale, the means of the three factors show significant differences between the different agents involved (Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(2, 755.768) = 46.993$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for the first factor, Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(2, 585.074) = 230.41$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for the second factor and Brown-Forsythe Robust  $F(2, 1061.678) = 63.80$ ,  $p = 0.000$  for the third factor). In Factor 1 the differences found are significant for all the comparisons of parents with the rest of the agents, in Factor 2 for all the comparisons made, and in Factor 3 for all the comparisons involving parents.

Table 6 shows the means by agent within each country (except France, where only pupils participated). Except for the comparison between the means of Factor 2 of Problems Perceived at the School and Factor 3 of Personal Repercussions in the Austrian sample, all the comparisons were significant ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) according to the ANOVA F test or Brown-Forsythe Robust F.

As regards the significant differences found between the factors of the subscale Problems Perceived at the School by means of post hoc tests, in Austria they are only



Table 6. Means and standard deviations by agent within each country

		Subscale: Problems Perceived at the School				
		N	Factor 1		Factor 2	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Austria	Pupils	264	26.78	4.662	5.52	2.136
	Parents	102	25.17	5.535	5.55	2.196
	Teachers	17	23.59	4.360	6.29	2.024
	Total	383	26.21	4.968	5.56	2.148
Hungary	Pupils	257	21.96	4.690	4.06	1.330
	Parents	225	20.00	4.707	4.42	1.237
	Teachers	127	19.70	3.402	5.68	1.463
	Total	609	20.77	4.570	4.53	1.458
Spain	Pupils	666	25.44	5.599	5.09	2.050
	Parents	270	23.41	6.158	4.65	1.968
	Teachers	100	25.48	5.506	4.99	1.573
	Total	1036	24.92	5.805	4.97	1.995

		Subscale: Personal Repercussions						
		N	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Austria	Pupils	267	18.14	4.304	5.38	1.997	7.06	2.145
	Parents	96	16.17	5.160	4.83	1.939	6.49	2.366
	Teachers	11	15.09	4.158	10.45	1.036	6.82	1.168
	Total	374	17.54	4.623	5.39	2.160	6.90	2.192
Hungary	Pupils	262	11.89	3.580	3.65	1.212	6.03	2.171
	Parents	224	11.34	3.128	5.21	1.215	4.96	1.485
	Teachers	127	12.25	2.786	10.46	1.213	6.03	0.959
	Total	613	11.76	3.279	5.63	2.836	5.64	1.807
Spain	Pupils	793	15.13	5.236	5.81	2.887	7.45	2.539
	Parents	259	12.68	4.818	4.40	2.338	6.36	2.589
	Teachers	91	18.31	6.273	6.55	3.307	8.20	2.495
	Total	1143	14.83	5.425	5.55	2.881	7.26	2.599

found between the mean of pupils and those of teachers and parents in Factor 1; in Hungary there are significant differences between all the groups compared in Factor 2 and between pupils and teachers and pupils and parents in Factor 1; and in Spain there are significant differences between the means of parents and pupils in both factors and of parents and teachers in the first factor. As for the post hoc tests for the subscale Personal Repercussions, the following significant differences were found: 1) Austria, between pupils and parents in the first factor, and between teachers and the rest of the

agents in the second; 2) Hungary, between parents and teachers in the first factor, between all the groups in the second factor and between parents and the other agents in the third; 3) Spain, between all the compared pairs in the first and third factors, and between parents and both pupils and teachers in the second factor.

## DISCUSSION

First of all, it is important to consider the psychometric data of the instrument employed, which presents high reliability in the different countries assessed and in its application to pupils, teachers and parents (Table 2). Thus, the total Cronbach's alpha is 0.891, the lowest levels being in the Personal Repercussions subscale in the teachers' sample from Hungary (0.6) and in the Problems Perceived at the School subscale in the sample of pupils from Austria (0.69).

As regards the factor structure, two main dimensions clearly stand out (Table 3). The first of these concerns common problems of coexistence and school conflict (including items related to insults, fights, apathy and disaffection, etc.) and the second concerns aspects associated with more serious antisocial behaviour (such as use or presence of drugs, use or presence of aggressive objects and problems of intercultural coexistence). Thus, it would appear important to differentiate not only between the common forms of abuse (direct/indirect, physical/verbal, etc.), but also between levels of seriousness, with more extreme manifestations, though less common, being more closely associated with antisocial behaviour.

As far as the subscale Personal Repercussions is concerned, it is subdivided in two. On the one hand would be common types of conflict (including insults, fights, confrontation between pupils and teachers, problems of cultural integration and lack of clear coexistence norms), and on the other, aspects that have more to do with apathy and disaffection (Teachers just teach, showing no concern or interest in coexistence aspects, pupils think the teachers do not understand them, and pupils are apathetic and disaffected, or bored). Both types of problem should be taken into account on analyzing school coexistence.

As regards the incidence of conflicts, France and Austria are the countries that present the highest levels. These are followed by Spain and, with a clearly lower level, Hungary. Nevertheless, if we consider only the "serious" problems of coexistence, Spain would present the highest incidence, followed by France and Austria, and, once again with notably lower levels, Hungary. Thus, it can be seen how the incidence of coexistence problems is markedly lower in Hungary compared to the rest of the countries considered (Table 4). This may be related to the particular socio-historical characteristics of that country. It is probably in the most industrialized nations where these types of problem are most widespread, and, indeed, it is in such countries where programmes have begun to be set up for preventing them. Nevertheless, the success of these interventions requires an analysis of the relevant characteristics of each country (such as awareness of the problem, involvement of all the agents in its solution, or capability of professionals), which, in turn, can contribute to explaining and understanding the greater or lesser success of the programmes established (Smith *et al.*, 2004).

In relation to apathy and disaffection (second dimension within the Personal Repercussions subscale), it can be observed that it follows a trend similar to the previous dimension, though not quite so marked (Table 4). Hungary continues to present levels below those of the other three countries, but the difference is only significant in relation to the country with the highest score (France).

It is also important to take into account who is assessing the conflicts, since assessments differ depending on the perspective (Table 5). Thus, it can be seen how for problems of a “mild” nature, pupils perceive a higher incidence than teachers (especially as regards the Personal Repercussions subscale). However, for “serious” problems of coexistence, teachers perceive a higher incidence than pupils. These discrepancies may be due to the fact that the second type of problem is much more noticeable to teachers, and gives them more cause for concern, than the first. It should also be borne in mind that the first type of problem is more easily detected by pupils, who are much more likely than teachers to observe the behaviours involved (Pakaslahti & Keltikangas, 2000).

Finally, it is parents and the family that are least likely to perceive these types of problem, particularly those included in the Personal Repercussions subscale. It would therefore seem necessary to increase the amount of information given to parents and their involvement in relation to such problems, in order to make real progress on reducing their incidence and that of the wider problems associated with them (Glover, Gough, Johnson & Cartwright, 2000; Roberts & Morotti, 2000).

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