

### Nicknames in Adolescence: A Psychoanalytic Discussion

#### *Apelidos na Adolescência: Uma Discussão Psicanalítica*

#### *Apodos en la Adolescencia: Una Discusión Psicoanalítica*

#### *Les Surnoms à l'Adolescence : Une Discussion Psychanalytique*

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### Abstract

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by intense physical and emotional changes, during which identity formation is largely shaped by relationships with peers. In this context, nicknames may either facilitate or hinder adolescents' psychosocial dynamics. From a psychoanalytic perspective, adolescence is understood as a period in which fundamental processes of subjective constitution are revisited within peer relationships, particularly the Oedipus complex and the mirror stage. This article originated from a study aimed at understanding the processes of giving and receiving nicknames during adolescence. It was a qualitative, descriptive, exploratory study conducted at a reference public high school in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil. The sample consisted of nine students aged 15-19 years, selected intentionally and defined by theoretical saturation. Data collection was performed through individual, face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured script, along with a sociodemographic questionnaire. Data were analyzed using discourse analysis. The results indicated that most nicknames emerged and/or circulated between 8 and 12 years of age, with nicknames from this period occupying a prominent place in the participants' narratives. In addition, several cases were identified in which nicknames led to significant changes in peers' perceptions of the adolescent and in the adolescent's self-perception. Overall, the study revealed that nicknames can mediate processes underlying the reactivation of the Oedipus complex and the mirror stage, transforming the meanings embedded in adolescents' relationships with peers and with themselves, and thereby shaping the overall experience of adolescence.

**Keywords:** adolescent, nicknames, schools, psychoanalysis.

### Resumo

*A adolescência é uma fase caracterizada por intensas transformações físicas e emocionais, tratando-se de um período em que a construção identitária é amplamente determinada pela relação com os pares. Constata-se, neste sentido, que os apelidos têm o potencial de favorecer ou prejudicar a dinâmica psicossocial do adolescente. Sob a ótica psicanalítica, é admitido que o adolecer reedita, na relação com os pares, processos fundamentais de constituição subjetiva: o complexo de Édipo e o estágio do espelho. O presente artigo foi originado de uma pesquisa que teve como objetivo compreender os processos de dar e receber apelidos na adolescência. Tratou-se de um estudo qualitativo, descritivo e exploratório, realizado em uma escola de referência em ensino médio (EREM) da Região Metropolitana de*

*Recife (RMR) – PE. A amostra foi composta por nove estudantes, com idade entre 15 e 19 anos, e definida de forma intencional e por saturação teórica. A coleta de dados foi realizada através de entrevista individual, face a face, com roteiro semiestruturado e questionário sociodemográfico. Os dados foram analisados a partir da técnica de análise do discurso. Dentre os resultados, destacou-se que a maioria dos apelidos surgiu e/ou circulou entre os 8 e 12 anos de idade, tendo as alcunhas deste período ocupado um lugar de destaque no discurso dos entrevistados. Além disto, foram verificados vários casos em que os apelidos descritos provocaram mudanças significativas na percepção dos pares a respeito do adolescente e na sua autopercepção. Em suma, o estudo revelou que os apelidos são capazes de mediar determinados processos subjacentes à reedição do complexo de Édipo e do estágio do espelho, transformando significados subjacentes às relações do adolescente com os pares e consigo e, com isto, a vivência do adolecer como um todo.*

**Palavras-chave:** adolescente, apelidos, escolas, psicanálise.

### **Resumen**

*La adolescencia es una etapa caracterizada por intensas transformaciones físicas y emocionales, tratándose de un período en el que la construcción identitaria está ampliamente determinada por la relación con los pares. En este sentido, se constata que los apodos tienen el potencial de favorecer o perjudicar la dinámica psicosocial del adolescente. Desde la óptica psicoanalítica, se admite que el proceso de adolecer reedita, en la relación con los pares, procesos fundamentales de constitución subjetiva: el complejo de Edipo y el estadio del espejo. El presente artículo se originó a partir de una investigación cuyo objetivo fue comprender los procesos de asignar y recibir apodos en la adolescencia. Se trató de un estudio cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, realizado en una escuela de referencia en enseñanza media (EREM) de la Región Metropolitana de Recife (RMR) – PE. La muestra estuvo compuesta por nueve estudiantes, con edades entre 15 y 19 años, definida de forma intencional y por saturación teórica. La recolección de datos se llevó a cabo mediante entrevistas individuales, cara a cara, con un guion semiestruturado y cuestionario sociodemográfico. Los datos fueron analizados a partir de la técnica de análisis del discurso. Entre los resultados, se destacó que la mayoría de los apodos surgió y/o circuló entre los ocho y doce años, ocupando las denominaciones de este período un lugar relevante en el discurso de los entrevistados. Además, se verificaron varios casos en los que los apodos descritos provocaron cambios significativos en la percepción de los pares respecto del adolescente y en la autopercepción de este. En suma, el estudio reveló que los apodos son capaces de mediar determinados procesos subyacentes a la reedición del complejo de Edipo y del estadio del espejo, transformando significados implícitos en las relaciones del adolescente con sus pares y consigo mismo, y, con ello, la vivencia del adolecer en su conjunto.*

**Palabras clave:** adolescente, apodos, escuelas, psicoanálisis.

### **Résumé**

*L'adolescence est une phase caractérisée par des transformations physiques et émotionnelles intenses, et c'est une période où la construction de l'identité est largement déterminée par la relation avec les pairs. En ce sens, on observe que les surnoms ont le potentiel de favoriser ou de nuire à la dynamique psychosociale de l'adolescent. Du point de vue psychanalytique, il est admis que l'adolescence réédite, dans le rapport aux pairs, des processus fondamentaux de constitution subjective : le complexe d'Œdipe et le stade du miroir. Cet article résulte d'une recherche visant à comprendre les processus d'attribution et de réception des surnoms à l'adolescence. Il s'agissait d'une étude qualitative, descriptive et exploratoire, réalisée dans un lycée de référence (EREM) de la Région Métropolitaine de Recife (RMR) – PE. L'échantillon était composé de neuf étudiants, âgés de 15 à 19 ans, et défini intentionnellement et par saturation théorique. La collecte des données a été réalisée par le biais d'entretiens individuels en face à face, avec un script semi-structuré et un questionnaire sociodémographique. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide de la technique de l'analyse du discours. Parmi les résultats, il a été souligné que la plupart des surnoms apparaissaient et/ou circulaient entre huit et douze ans, et que les surnoms de cette période occupaient une place importante dans le discours des personnes interrogées. De plus, dans plusieurs cas, les surnoms décrits ont entraîné des changements significatifs dans la perception des pairs à l'égard de l'adolescent et dans l'auto-perception de celui-ci. En bref, l'étude a révélé que les surnoms peuvent jouer un rôle de médiateur dans certains processus sous-jacents à la réactivation du complexe d'Œdipe et du stade du miroir, transformant les significations sous-jacentes aux relations de l'adolescent avec ses pairs et avec lui-même et, par conséquent, l'expérience de l'adolescence dans son ensemble.*

**Mots-clés :** adolescent, surnoms, écoles, psychanalyse.

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Social life is complex in its configuration. From this complexity, core aspects can be revealed through seemingly trivial phenomena. In this context, the processes of giving and receiving nicknames may be understood as potential indicators of broader social realities (Pais, 2018).

Nickname-giving refers to the practice of renaming individuals, with the nickname constituting the product of this practice (Castro, 2018). A review of the literature on the processes of giving and receiving nicknames shows that a single nickname may serve multiple functions. It can facilitate or hinder the construction of bonds and group identities, act as a vehicle for intimacy and affection in interpersonal relationships, or function as an offensive and/or oppressive mechanism, as observed in bullying, among other possibilities. At the core of these diverse functions lies the capacity of nicknames to transform how individuals make meaning of their social relationships and how they are, in turn, signified by others across different stages of development (Holland, 1990; Klerk & Bosch, 1997; Pais, 2018; Phillips, 1990).

Adolescence is marked by a number of physiological and emotional transformations, largely because it unfolds concurrently with puberty. It represents a strategic period for identity formation, a process that is strongly shaped by the quality of relationships adolescents establish with their peers. During this stage, the replacement of proper names with nicknames may function as a strategy for socialization (Andrade et al., 2022; Bolaños & Pereira, 2019; Erikson, 1987).

Psychoanalytic discussions of adolescence acknowledge that the transformations associated with puberty reactivate, within adolescents' peer relationships, fundamental processes of psychic constitution: the Oedipus complex and the mirror stage (Dantas, 2002; Mandelli & Biazin, 2018).

According to Freud (1886–1899/1996a), the Oedipus complex is a psychic experience in which the child directs desire toward the parent of the opposite sex and perceives the parent of the same sex as both rival and object of identification. This process is fundamental to psychic constitution because it compels the subject to position themselves in relation to desire and sexuality. The resolution of this configuration, which entails the renunciation of incestuous desire, inaugurates the superego, a psychic instance resulting from the internalization of parental prohibitions. The superego guides social life insofar as it functions as the moral conscience of the ego (Freud, 1923–1925/2011).

Freud (1886–1899/1996a) further argues that incest is antisocial because, in such a condition, the family remains in a symbiotic relationship and becomes incapable of establishing contact with strangers. Consequently, the founder of psychoanalysis maintains that civilization is grounded in the progressive renunciation of incest. In this context, as adolescents revisit the Oedipal scene and confront the lack produced by the loss of childhood objects, they seek sexual satisfaction in objects situated outside the familial narrative. Thus, the reactivation of the Oedipus complex in adolescence places the subject before a history that refers back to childhood but is now open to being rewritten (Freud, 1901/1996c; Mandelli & Biazin, 2018).

In dialogue with these elements, Fontella and Torossian (2017) argue that, in adolescence, processes of identification experienced in childhood are also revisited, in a manner similar to the reactivation of the Oedipus complex. Among these processes, the mirror stage is particularly noteworthy. According to Lacan (1998), this phenomenon emerges around 6 months of age, when the subject recognizes both the other and themselves in the mirror. Through the relationship established with the elements of this experience, the subject gains access to and becomes attached to the image of a body endowed with maturational potency, which serves as a symbolic matrix through which the ego precipitates into a primordial formation.

Lacan (1998) clarifies that this form situates the ego within a fictional dimension, since the body endowed with maturational potency is presented to the subject only as a *Gestalt*. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the constitutive character of this *Gestalt* by explaining its function in ensuring the mental continuity of the ego, the psychic instance responsible for mediating the relationship between the subject and surrounding reality.

Drawing on Lacanian theory, Dantas (2002) notes that the mirror stage represents an experience in which the subject identifies with the image resulting from the recognition of both self and other in the mirror. However, it is the gaze and the voice of parental figures, who perform maternal and paternal functions, that sustain this image.

In adolescence, the reactivation of the mirror stage occurs as a consequence of the adolescent's need to reappropriate the bodily image constructed in childhood, given the transformations brought about by puberty. Unlike the initial experience, the support for this image now derives from the gaze and the voice of peers (Dantas, 2002).

Thus, nicknames have the potential to transform the meanings underlying adolescents' relational dynamics with their peers. These relationships are central to the experience of adolescence, as they constitute the setting for processes that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, are fundamental to psychic constitution. Accordingly, the study that gave rise to this article was conducted with the aim of understanding the processes of giving and receiving nicknames during adolescence.

## Methodological Procedures

This article is based on an empirical study with a qualitative approach, characterized by its focus on meanings, motivations, beliefs, and other elements that constitute the individual's subjective universe (Minayo, 2014). The sample was defined intentionally and closed according to the criterion of theoretical saturation, meaning that interviews were discontinued when participants' accounts began to recur with reasonable redundancy (Nascimento et al., 2018).

The field study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with adolescents from a reference public high school located in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, state of Pernambuco, Brazil. A total of 9 adolescents were interviewed, including 5 females and 4 males, aged between 15 and 19 years. The semi-structured interview guide was chosen because

it aligns with qualitative research approaches by encouraging participants' protagonism in the production of their own discourse (Moré, 2015). The school was selected because it constitutes, according to Pais (2018), a space of creative sociability. Moreover, Kolawole et al. (2009) report that three out of four children receive a nickname at school.

The semi-structured interview guide was centered on the following triggering question: "What is/was it like to be (the adolescent's nickname)?" This was complemented by guiding questions aimed at identifying the origin of the nickname, the individuals who used it, the places and situations in which it circulated, the meanings attributed to it, the feelings associated with it, and the adolescent's identification with the nickname. In addition, questions addressing the practice of giving nicknames were included. However, this latter aspect did not emerge as a significant focus in the discussion presented in this article.

All interviews were audio-recorded with prior written authorization from the participants and their legal guardians and had an average duration of 23 minutes. Transcriptions were produced verbatim, preserving the adolescents' vocabulary in its entirety. Data were analyzed using discourse analysis, which, according to Schiavini and Garrido (2018), seeks to understand not only the words spoken but also the context and the manner in which subjects articulate or refrain from articulating them. It should be noted that interpretations grounded in the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, which underpin this article, were applied only to a subset of the observed phenomena.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the field research included a sociodemographic questionnaire covering age, race/ethnicity, gender, school grade, history of grade repetition, neighborhood of residence, household composition, siblings, family income, religion, and employment status. This instrument was designed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the context in which adolescents produced their discourses.

The study was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Universidade de Pernambuco (CAAE: 57898022.3.0000.5207), which ensures that all ethical principles related to research involving human subjects were observed. To protect participants' identities, both participants' names and the nicknames mentioned in the interviews were replaced with fictitious names.

## Results and Discussion

At the outset, it is important to emphasize that the scarcity of literature on studies addressing nicknames, as noted by Vereda (2007), remains significant in the Brazilian context. This gap imposed limitations on the discussion, which often had to rely on studies that were either relatively dated or conducted in other countries. These factors are understood as constraints that may hinder the interpretation of the findings, particularly because, as Pais (2018) argues, the production and circulation of nicknames evolve in tandem with surrounding cultural processes.

Table 1 presents the adolescents interviewed, identified by names of characters from the American animated series *Recess*, known in Brazil as *Hora do Recreio*, which was chosen for its depiction of adolescents' everyday school life. Similarly, the nicknames reported by the participants were adapted. These modifications were made to preserve the interviewees' identities. Notably, João Gustavo and Ana Luiza are not names of characters from the aforementioned program but were exceptions deemed necessary in order to preserve the original meaning of the participants' names and nicknames. Among the variables included in the sociodemographic questionnaire, only age proved to be relevant to the discussion developed in this section.

**Table 1**

*Presentation of participants who received nicknames*

| Name         | Gender | Age (years) | Nickname(s)                                                                                      |
|--------------|--------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hustler      | Male   | 15          | Super Pig; Fatty; Hus                                                                            |
| Patrícia     | Female | 15          | Tang; Spinelli; Pati                                                                             |
| Mikey        | Male   | 16          | Balloon; Mik                                                                                     |
| Gus          | Male   | 16          | Axe                                                                                              |
| Gretchen     | Female | 16          | Dinosaur; Acne                                                                                   |
| Randall      | Male   | 18          | Lunatic; Randall Chicago; RC                                                                     |
| João Gustavo | Male   | 18          | Jimmy Neutron; Joãozinho; Tavinho                                                                |
| Ana Luiza    | Female | 18          | Needle; Orca; Rapunzel; Ana Pencil; Goldilocks; Ana Lu; Luizana; Little Ana; Mr. Bean's Daughter |
| Ashley       | Female | 19          | Fofão                                                                                            |

At the outset, it is essential to emphasize that, excluding Gus and Ashley—who reported only one nickname, the narratives of five participants (Hustler, Patrícia, Mikey, Gretchen, and Randall), all of whom had two or more nicknames, revolved predominantly around a single epithet, respectively: “Super Pig,” “Tang,” “Balloon,” “Acne,” and “Lunatic.” Although João Gustavo and Ana Luiza, in comparison with the other participants, elaborated more extensively on additional nicknames, a clear predominance of the nicknames “Jimmy Neutron” and “Orca” was also observed in their accounts.

Notably, with the exception of the nickname “Lunatic,” all nicknames that occupied a prominent place in the adolescents’ interviews emerged between 8 and 12 years of age. This finding suggests that this period, marking the end of childhood and the onset of adolescence according to the World Health Organization’s definition, is particularly fertile for the emergence of new nicknames. This scenario is consistent with the observations of Orgel and Tuckman (1935), who argue that the attribution of nicknames commonly occurs in the context of initiation rites, such as puberty.

In addition, nicknames acquired between 8 and 12 years of age affected several participants more significantly. Randall, for example, reported that he did not recall the exact age at which the nickname “Lunatic” first appeared. However, his narrative indicates that, within this age range, the nickname, toward which he had previously been indifferent, began to cause discomfort:

At first, I didn’t really mind it, you know. I took it as a joke, because I was a kid and all that, so I laughed it off — “oh, you’re the lunatic,” and so on. I even joked back. But there came a point when it started to bother me. I think it was in seventh grade, right? That was when I moved to the afternoon shift (...) and it was the time when I started getting to know girls and things like that. And then, every time I was about to get involved with someone that year, people would say things like, “oh, you’re going to be with Lunatic,” and some girls would back out... and that really started to bother me a lot. (Randall).

A similar pattern was observed in Gretchen’s reflections on the nicknames “Dinosaur” and “Acne.” Regarding the former, she stated: “I saw myself as a child, we were kids, and it was a nickname that didn’t really influence my life very much.” In contrast, when referring to the latter, she explained: “(...) it did affect me, in a way, because it was at the beginning of adolescence... when you start liking certain boys, and then the other boys call you names...”

These excerpts indicate, albeit indirectly, that age may be a determining factor in the extent to which individuals are affected by the nicknames they receive. Table 2 presents the nicknames categorized according to the content to which they refer.

**Table 2**

*Classification of nicknames by category*

| Category                 | Nickname(s)                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Physical characteristics | Body-related: Fat; Acne<br>Characters / Cartoons: Super Pig; Jimmy Neutron; Rapunzel; Goldilocks; Mr. Bean’s Daughter; Fofão<br>Animals: Dinosaur; Orca<br>Objects: Balloon; Needle |
| Behavior                 | Lunatic                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Name-based               | First name: Hus; Pati; Mik; Little Ana; Ana Lu; Luizana; Joãozinho<br>Surname: Spinelli; Tavinho; Machado<br>Name + Suffix: Randall Chicago; Ana Pencil                             |
| Other                    | Tang; RC                                                                                                                                                                            |

The categories identified are consistent with those described in several studies addressing the phenomenon of nickname-giving (Busse, 1983; Klerk & Bosch, 1997; Kolawole et al., 2009; Phillips, 1990). In contrast, however, to more recent studies, such as those by Pais (2018) and Carvalho (2019), which reported a marked predominance of nicknames related to bodily characteristics, the present study found that body-related and name-based nicknames occurred in equal proportion. It should be emphasized, nevertheless, that this equivalence was purely quantitative, as adolescents’ narratives rarely focused on nicknames belonging to the name-based category.

In one of Mikey’s statements, for example, the adolescent reported that “Mik” was the only nickname he currently had and that people called him by this name with some frequency: “Researcher: and today, do you have any nickname? Mikey: today... no! Just the one from my name, because my name is Mikey, so they call me ‘Mik’ a lot, you know?” However, when initially asked about his nicknames, Mikey did not mention this epithet. Moreover, the way he began his statement suggests that he does not effectively consider “Mik” to be a nickname. Supporting this interpretation, during 28 minutes of interview, the nickname was mentioned only once, whereas “Balloon,” considering only direct references, was cited 12 times by the participant.



Similarly, Ana Luiza spoke of three nicknames (“Ana Lu,” “Little Ana,” and “Luizana”) that were current and described as “super okay,” an expression that, in her own words, conveys affection: “For me, what I think is okay is what I like, you know?” In contrast, Ana spent most of her interview discussing the nicknames “Needle,” “Orca,” and “Goldilocks.” In fact, given the large number of nicknames she listed, the researcher asked whether any of them had been particularly significant. Her response was: “I think it was ‘Orca,’ right? Because that’s when I started thinking to myself: ‘when I was thin, people talked; when I got fat, people talked.’ I think that was the one that affected me the most!” (Ana Luiza).

Reinforcing the qualitative asymmetry observed between name-based nicknames and those related to bodily characteristics, particularities emerged in the cases of “Spinelli” and “Joãozinho.” Although both are name-based nicknames, they appear to have originated in situational and bodily factors, respectively.

In the first case, “Spinelli,” Patrícia’s account of a classroom episode indicates that the way the teacher pronounced her surname during roll call, followed by her classmates’ reaction, conferred nickname status on “Spinelli”: “The teacher called roll: ‘Patrícia Spinelli,’ and then they started saying ‘Spinelli, Spinelli,’ and they began calling me just Spinelli! Not Patrícia... ‘Hey, Spinelli, come here!’” (Patrícia).

In the second case, “Joãozinho,” João’s narrative suggests that this nickname was attributed by his peers because of his short stature: “Man, ‘Joãozinho’... it was in seventh grade that people started calling me Joãozinho... and it only came up because, well, it’s a name, right? It’s a name. I’m short, small, so... Joãozinho! You get it?” (João Gustavo).

Such statements, particularly the latter, provide a basis for psychoanalytic reflections on the qualitative contrast between name-based nicknames and those related to bodily characteristics. This asymmetry, far from being arbitrary, appears to be associated with the processes of reactivation of the Oedipus complex and the mirror stage, which Mandelli and Biazin (2018) and Fontella and Torossian (2017), respectively, argue take place during adolescence.

Freudian theory suggests that the rejection of incest leads the subject to a relative detachment from parental figures and a subsequent redirection of desire toward an other situated outside the familial narrative (Freud, 1901–1905/1996b; Mandelli & Biazin, 2018). Thus, adolescence introduces new facets to relationships with non-parental others, within which adolescents define new reference figures, construct new identifications, and, through these processes, gradually constitute themselves as subjects (Cairolí & Gauer, 2009).

From this perspective, the limited emphasis placed on nicknames associated with legal first names and/or surnames, and the prominence of nicknames from other categories in adolescents’ narratives, may reflect the detachment from familial figures that occurs during the reactivation of the Oedipus complex. This interpretation is supported by Bolaños and Pereira (2019), who argue that the emergence of a nickname tends to signify a displacement of the proper name and, with it, a separation from the processes of appropriation and meaning-making previously anchored in that name.

Consistent with these formulations, it is noteworthy that even some name-based nicknames, such as “Spinelli” and “Joãozinho,” emerged within peer relationships and around meanings distinct from those previously linked to the familial context.

In order to elucidate elements of the psychoanalytic understanding relevant to this discussion, such as detachment from familial figures, there was a clear emphasis on nicknames attributed and used by peers. In this regard, several of these nicknames were observed to mediate the reactivation of the mirror stage.

Based on Lacan’s writings (1998), the mirror stage is understood as a phenomenon that occurs from the sixth month of life onward, in which an initial sketch of the ego is formed through a process whereby the individual identifies with an image sustained by the gaze and voice of the parental other. In adolescence, according to Dantas (2002), this experience is repeated, but within peer relationships:

Researcher: did anything change after he gave you that nickname?

Ashley: I started feeling bothered by my cheeks... you know? I started seeing them as bigger (...) I hadn’t noticed that before. But after he [the friend who gave her the nickname] started saying, “wow, what big cheeks,” and so on, then I... it got stuck in my head! (Ashley)

All these accounts corroborate Dantas’s (2002, p. 38) assertion regarding the reactivation of the mirror stage: what now guarantees the body image is no longer the mother’s gaze and voice, but what peers see and say.

The excerpts from Ashley’s interview are particularly illustrative, as they demonstrate how certain aspects of the mirror stage are reactivated in adolescents’ peer relationships. Identification with the image evoked by her schoolmate’s gaze and speech was so significant that it led Ashley to seek ways to reduce the size of her cheeks: “I even looked up videos to see if I could make them smaller... some kind of exercise to do, you know? (...) I typed like this [on YouTube]: ‘how to slim your cheeks?’ [laughs]” (Ashley).

A similar pattern was observed in Mikey’s case, who received the nickname “Balloon” in a context in which he was interested in a girl. After he shared this information with his friends, one of them commented: “look, you being a balloon like that, nothing’s going to happen.” Following this episode, several peers began to call him by this nickname, with which Mikey identified and appropriated so deeply that, even today, despite being noticeably thin, he still sometimes recognizes

himself in that image. Drawing on Lacan (1998), this situation illustrates the mental persistence of an image that, through ongoing maintenance (being called Balloon) and identification (seeing oneself as Balloon), gave rise to a “Balloon-ego.”

This thing with the image is still there... even today I can't take my shirt off, or anything (...) I can't even take my shirt off at the beach nowadays (...) because... I keep thinking people will think I'm very fat, that... it stays in your head! (Mikey).

The final excerpts from Ashley (“then it... got stuck in my head!”) and Mikey (“it stays in your head!”) are illustrative of the mental persistence resulting from the mirror-stage experience, as explored in Lacanian theory.

Imaginary identification is structuring of the ego, as the meaning of the nickname as a name is sustained within the Imaginary register. According to Jorge and Ferreira (2005), the Imaginary in psychoanalysis concerns everything associated with the image of the body, without mediation by language. However, Lacanian theory clearly indicates that the act of naming transforms absence into presence, insofar as it does not summon the subject's name to the scene, but rather the named subject. As a name, the nickname is capable of eternalizing over time an image appropriated by the subject (Bolaños & Pereira, 2019; Fontella & Torossian, 2017; Lacan, 2005).

From then on, it was forever! Even today, when I go bowling with my friends, people call me that (...) I got to a point where my ribs were really showing, and... my bones here [pointing to his wrist], my elbows, everything, and I'd look down and still see myself as fat! Still see myself as “Balloon” (Mikey).

A similar pattern was observed in Hustler's account, who received the nickname “Fat” because of excess weight. Although he now describes himself as “stronger” (more muscular) than those who originally used the nickname, this physical transformation did not put an end to being addressed as “Fat”: “(...) just out of habit, they still call me that, my cousin, you know, calls me fat, but just joking... out of habit, you know, calling ‘hey, fat!’” (Hustler).

Pais (2018, p. 917), drawing on social representations theory, offers a similar observation regarding the fixation of images: nicknames fix an image in such a way that they survive the very change of that image, as long as there remains a territory through which they can circulate.

As shown by Pais (2018), nicknames are acts of naming capable of producing identity. This premise emerged clearly in the statements of some participants: “(...) I didn't want to be the fat one!” (Hustler); “Researcher: but what is it like to be Tang? Patrícia: it's being myself... I don't know how to explain it (...) Tang is me! [laughs]” (Patrícia).

At school and outside school, I was a completely different person! Because outside school I... I had a lot of friends, talked a lot, spoke a lot..., but inside school, with people calling me Jimmy Neutron, I didn't like it (...) it kind of made me feel... kind of depressed (...) inside school I was kind of... (João Gustavo).

Based on Sacconi (2021), it can be argued that, in Hustler's statement, the use of the definite article “the” in reference to the word “fat,” which is naturally an adjective, confers upon it the status of a noun, that is, a name. This aligns with the fact that one of his nicknames was Fat. Thus, when Hustler stated, in the way he did, that he “didn't want to be the fat one,” he was in fact expressing a rejection of the identity underlying the nickname “Fat.”

João Gustavo's statements are also particularly revealing, as they corroborate Bolaños and Pereira's (2019) assertion that a nickname confronts the subject with a dual identification. The implicit message in João's words suggests that he felt “kind of” depressed, indicating that only his former school identity, “Jimmy Neutron,” was affected by these emotions.

The term “kind of” appeared repeatedly throughout João Gustavo's interview: “I didn't really like talking much, you know... nowadays I really like talking, you get it? But after... ‘Jimmy Neutron,’ I didn't socialize much, you know? I'd feel kind of... kind of... you know?”; “I felt, uh... kind of bad, you know? I... I felt really sad!”; “When the year ended, I said: ‘when I go back to school, this new year, I'm going to stop being like this!’ You know? I'm going to stop being this person who doesn't talk back, this person who's kind of... you know?”

Overall, the findings of this study revealed that nicknames are capable of splitting the subject, branching them into identities that may be entirely distinct and, at times, mutually incompatible, as observed in other statements by the same participant:

I used to say, “man, if I go along with Tavinho, hang out with those people I was really close to outside school, I'll go down a path I don't want to take,” you know? So in the end... it was better to be Joãozinho, it was better to try to undo “Jimmy Neutron” inside school than to keep being Tavinho outside, you get it? (João Gustavo).

This form of splitting was also observed in one of Gus's statements. Through a parapraxis, in which he replaced what would apparently have been “I immediately got tense” with “I immediately got suspended,” he may have figuratively indicated that his desired identity, Gus, was suspended in the face of the possibility that the nickname identity could be brought into the scene through the way his romantic interest addressed a letter to him:

We agreed to send little notes to each other, you know? Then she had to write two notes to me, and she told me that at the time, and I immediately got suspended, because I thought: “did she... did she write my full name?” (...) And then I got really nervous, I got very nervous, because I was actually afraid that she had sent it with Gus Machado as my name (Gus).

Another aspect that proved relevant to the discussion concerns the authorship of nicknames. Of the 27 nicknames reported, only two — “Randall Chicago” and “RC” — were explicitly self-assigned, in contrast to the findings of Bolaños and Pereira (2019), in which most adolescents named themselves. Unlike the mirror-stage experience described by Lacan (1998), in which the subject plays an active role in forming an initial sketch of the ego, the identities resulting from nicknames in this study were forged without the participation of nearly all the interviewees.

Departing from the scenario of strong acceptance and the predominance of “playful identifications” described by Pais (2018) regarding adolescents’ relationships with their nicknames, most nicknames in the present study were situated within narratives of dissatisfaction: “Fat,” “Super Pig,” “Machado,” “Balloon,” “Acne,” “Dinosaur,” “Lunatic,” “Jimmy Neutron,” “Fofão,” “Needle,” “Orca,” “Goldilocks,” “Ana Pencil,” and “Mr. Bean’s Daughter.”

According to Mensato (2012), a subject’s rejection of a nickname is often precisely what motivates its continued use by its authors, leading the subject both to signify and to be signified within the group through the very nickname that causes discomfort. Corroborating this view, several participants reported that the dynamics and/or underlying meanings of their social relationships were transformed by nicknames they found distressing:

So I’d kind of hang out, but it was like I was the court jester of the group, right? (...) Then they’d get together, hit me, and sometimes it happened like, “hey, let’s beat up Lunatic!” that’s what the guys used to say at the time, “let’s beat up Lunatic!” and they’d gang up on me and hit me and all. That really started to bother me (Randall).

Similarly, it was observed that identities imposed through nickname-giving were absorbed and, for a period of time, transformed the dynamics and meanings of adolescents’ social relationships. Processes of rejection of these nicknames were also identified, which likewise produced effects. In João Gustavo’s case, for example, this rejection was evident primarily through certain words that recurred in his discourse:

I started giving it back, giving it back, giving it back... and then people stopped, you know? (...) Like, in seventh, eighth... up to ninth grade, I... it feels like I started loosening up more, in middle school I started loosening up more! And then, like... people only called me Joãozinho, and then... it stopped! They forgot “Jimmy Neutron,” you know? They forgot it! (João Gustavo).

From a figurative perspective, a direct proportionality can be observed between the events narrated by João: as he “gave back” (especially through the act of nicknaming in return) the identity being imposed on him, he witnessed a gradual erasure of “Jimmy Neutron.” Notably, João’s account of “loosening up” from that identity, an expression suggestive of a feeling of confinement, made room for the emergence of a new identity, “Joãozinho,” which paradoxically both contributed to the extinction of the former nickname and was itself a product of it.

Similarly, most adolescents were able to bring about the extinction or at least a substantial reduction in the circulation of nicknames that distressed them. This occurred through different strategies, which can be broadly divided into active and passive approaches.

Active strategies were mainly based on confronting or sanctioning those who contributed to maintaining and circulating the nickname:

Then it was a whole process... we even ended up going to the principal’s office because of it, because I asked them [the classmates who called her by the nickname] to stop at certain moments during class and they wouldn’t stop... then they were sent to the office, my mother went, talked to them, anyway, it was always a process, it wasn’t just one immediate conversation like it was with my friends (Gretchen).

Passive strategies, which were more prevalent, were characterized by adolescents’ efforts to change the elements on which the nicknames were based or to which they were strongly associated: “(...) I always watched motivational videos to lose weight, tried to look for a gym...” (Mikey); “Researcher: what did you do to make that nickname go away? Randall: what I did was, like, completely change my lifestyle!” (Randall); “(...) I still have acne on my face, but much less, because I sought treatment, because that nickname really affected me” (Gretchen); “Researcher: how did those nicknames end? Hustler: I started going to the gym, right?” (Hustler).

In dialogue with Vereda (2007), these findings show that some adolescents developed very particular strategies to deal with the problem of nicknames. However, unlike the strategies identified by that author, the most frequently reported actions in the present study did not involve ignoring, dismissing, or cutting off friendships with the nickname-givers. Direct or indirect statements indicating such strategies were observed only in the cases of Mikey and Ashley: “I’ve... left some friendships behind because of that, I don’t like it...”; “Researcher: how do you deal with these remnants today? Mikey: I just ignore it, that’s all” (Mikey).

He was, like, my friend, but I never gave him space to call me by a nickname or anything, because I never gave him a nickname either, you know? Like, he was a friend, but I always respected him... I didn’t give him permission to call me that (...) I still talk to the guy normally. We’re not friends, of course, but... I talk normally when needed (Ashley).



Interestingly, with the exception of Patrícia's nickname "Tang," all nicknames that played a prominent role in participants' narratives were extinguished or had their circulation substantially reduced before the beginning of high school. Given that all these nicknames were described as negative, the present findings converge with statements from adolescents interviewed by Carvalho (2019, p. 343), who reported that bad nicknames are things of the past, from middle school, from the time when all students are immature.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, it may be argued that the extinction of the nicknames mentioned above, much like their emergence, is associated with the process of reactivation of the mirror stage, which, analogously to the original phenomenon, manifests only as an initial sketch of the adolescent ego.

In view of the still limited body of literature on the processes of giving and receiving nicknames, it is essential to conclude by encouraging further studies on this topic, regardless of disciplinary boundaries or study design. However, considering that most nicknames that featured prominently in participants' narratives emerged, circulated, and disappeared or diminished within a specific age range, it should be emphasized that, depending on research objectives, studies involving adolescents in lower secondary education may be particularly strategic for capturing the phenomenon of nickname-giving.

### Final Considerations

This study showed that nicknames can mediate certain processes underlying the reactivation of the Oedipus complex and the mirror stage, which, in turn, are set in motion by the transformations associated with puberty.

The qualitative contrast between the limited prominence of name-based nicknames and the centrality of nicknames from other categories in participants' narratives can be understood as a reflection of the detachment from parental figures that takes place when the Oedipal scene is revisited. Consistent with this interpretation, it was observed that even nicknames classified as name-based may express such distancing, insofar as nicknames that emerge in adolescents' relationships with peers can carry meanings that differ substantially from those constructed within family relationships.

Regarding the relationship observed between nicknames and the reactivation of the mirror stage, the findings first indicated that the period between 8 and 12 years of age is particularly fertile for the emergence of nicknames. In addition, nicknames tended to be more meaningful for the subject within this age range, which may be understood as a transitional phase characterized by the end of childhood and the onset of adolescence.

Second, the results highlighted the potential role of nicknames as mediators of the reactivation of the mirror stage, insofar as they documented narratives in which images (that gave rise to the nicknames), sustained by peers' gaze and voice, ultimately produced identities. Moreover, in a manner akin to the phenomenon described in Lacanian theory, nicknames often appeared as initial sketches of an "adolescent ego" that, grounded in a Gestalt, became fixed in the psyche and consolidated as subjectivity.

The study further indicated that the processes of assigning and receiving nicknames can transform the meanings that permeate adolescents' relationships with peers and with themselves, thereby exerting a significant influence on the overall experience of adolescence. Accordingly, it is reasonable to argue that these findings shed light on relevant aspects of psychoanalytic clinical work with adolescents and may contribute to professional practice not only among psychologists and psychoanalysts, but also among all professionals who work, or intend to work, with adolescents.

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