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Adolescents’ views on violence and hostility in relation to the “other”

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Abstract

The study aims at exploring adolescents’ views concerning violence and aggression in relation to the “other”, i.e. classmates of different cultural and religious background. The study further aims at exploring adolescents’ views on violence and aggression in relation to gender.

A total of 53 adolescents (30 boys and 23 girls) who attend the 3rd grade of High School and the 1st grade of Lyceum participated in the study. Qualitative data were selected through group discussion in *focus groups* aiming at an in depth exploration of adolescents’ views and experiences. Eight mixed sex focus groups were organized with 7 or eight participants in each group.

According to the findings, both boys and girls seem to relate several aspects of violent and aggressive behavior with masculinity. Furthermore, neither boys or girls seem to connect violence and aggression with their classmates’ place of origin to a great extend. In the case this is being done, however, adolescents’ views seem to reflect the dominant ideologies in both their school and social environment. Results further show that pupils, through their discourse, construct a social reality where violence carried out by the “other” is biologically or culturally determined. In this context, violence is justified.

Results are further discussed with the reference to the stereotypes that are emerging in the adolescents’ discourse.

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The present study aims at exploring adolescents' views concerning violence and aggression in relation to the "other". It focuses on adolescent boys and girls and explores their views on aggression and violence in the school context and in relation to the adolescents' classmates who are of various cultural and religious backgrounds.

At this point, it should be noted that questions concerning the students' views on violence and aggression in relation to the "other" retain their value because on one hand, it is well documented that violence and aggression in schools tends to become an important social problem (Rigby, 2004). On the other, besides the common beliefs or teachers' beliefs (Nikolaou, 2000), violence and aggression tends not to be associated with racial or ethnic divides (Junger-Tas, 1999; Boulton, 1995; Losel and Bliesener, 1999).

The increasing aggression and violence in schools has been an issue which has attracted the interest of researchers who are coming from several disciplines. It has been well documented that violence or bullying incidents involving adolescents are becoming more and more frequent in general, and in the school context in particular (Smith & Sharp, 1994; Schuster, 1996). It is also known that schools, one way or another, in modern societies do reinforce violence indirectly through processes such as competition among students, student evaluation, the pressure for high achievement, athletics etc. (Calliotis, et al., 2002).

More and more studies here in Greece have shown that aggression and bullying are quite common behaviors in the schools of the country although less frequent than in other countries (i.e. USA). Although there are no statistics on the subject which show the severity of the issue, the few empirical data which have been gathered show that there are a lot of students who are involved in incidents of physical or verbal aggression (Gotovos, 1996; Boulton et al., 2001; Petropoulos & Papastylianou, 2001; Hatzi et al., 2000; Andreou, 2002).

Useful as it is the above data do not address the issue of violence and aggression in relation to migration or race. Of special interest are two studies which aim at the understanding of (a) violence and aggression in a multicultural school (Sakonidis et al., 2000) and (b) native and non-native children's views on violence and hostility in schools (Sakka, unpublished data).

According to Sakonidis et al (2000), pupils' violent or aggressive behavior in the school has to do with a series of factors such as the type of the lesson, the interests of the pupils, their experiences (including the experience of moving from one place to another and consequently from one school to another) as well as their experiences in the family or the social environment they live in.

According to Sakka (unpublished data), high school students attribute violence and aggression to the students' different cultural background at a greater degree than pupils of the primary school.

At this point, it should be mentioned that during the last decades, an increasing number of studies has dealt with violence and aggression in relation to gender. Older studies focused on the differences between the two sexes and suggested that males and females are different, the males being more violent and aggressive than females (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). However, recent studies, suggest that broad patterns of violence exist. Moreover, violence cannot simply be understood as related to deviance or to the deficiency of the aggressor's or the victim's personality or to the dis-function of a particular family, culture or subculture (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). Data now show that when broader definitions of violence and aggression are given and when socio-cultural factors are taken into account violence and aggression by either males or females may take different forms (Hyde, 1984; Plomin & Foch, 1981; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997).

Thus, in the context of these new approaches, a more complex relation between gender on the one hand, and violence and aggression on the other, has emerged.

Moreover, recent studies attribute the differences observed between males and females as far as the expression of violence and aggression are concerned to the ways masculinity is constructed in the different social contexts. As these studies suggest, "the social, cultural and psychological construction of masculinity is related to violence and ...some kinds of masculinity are more directly associated with violent behavior than are others" (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, p.119).

Method

A total of 53 adolescents (30 boys and 23 girls) who attend the 3rd grade of High School and the 1st grade of Lyceum participated in the study. Pupils attended schools from the areas of Thessaloniki, Alexandroupoli and Xanthi .

Qualitative data were selected through group discussion in *focus groups* aiming at an in depth exploration of adolescents' views and experiences. Eight mixed sex focus groups were organized with 7 or eight participants in each group. Focus group discussion aimed at an in-depth exploration of adolescents' perceptions and experiences.

During the discussion in the groups, pupils were asked (a) to define violence and aggression, (b) to describe personal experiences of violent and aggressive incidents and (c) to discuss differences between sexes and (d) to discuss differences between people of different cultural background.

Data were tape recorded and a thematic analysis was used in order to analyze the data.

Results and Discussion

Focus groups: Discussing violence and aggression

Data from the taped conversations were subjected to thematic analysis. In this paper only those data which concern violence and aggression in relation to gender and the pupils' socio cultural origin will be discussed.

From the analysis, among others, two themes emerged (I) the association of violence and aggression with the pupils' place of origin and (II) the association of violence and aggression with masculinity.

I. The association of violence and aggression with the pupils' place of origin

During the focus group discussion, it was repeatedly found that teenagers do not necessarily associate violent and aggressive behaviour with the pupils' place of origin. When they do it, however, they attribute migrant peoples' behavior to a broad series of reasons which range from the general statement "it is always their fault" to quite elaborated explanations.

Thus, three broad types of explanations emerged:

- (1) Migrants' violence as a natural or biological phenomenon (determined by nature or biological factors)

- (2) Migrants' violence as a psychological phenomenon (related to the psychological difficulties migrants are faced with)
- (3) Migrants' violence as a social phenomenon (based in their interaction with native greeks)

(1) Migrants' violence as a natural or biological phenomenon (determined by nature or by biological factors)

Data show that, while talking about migrants' aggressive and violent behavior, some pupils constructed through their discourse, a context in which this type of behavior is in the foreign people's nature:

-It is usually them who start a fight (boy, 14)

-Let me tell you something about Russians... I haven't met worse people than them (girl, 14)

-From what I see , most of the incidents of violence I have experienced, involve children who are coming from another country (boy, 14)

In other cases, pupils attributed migrants' violence and aggression to biological factors. Foreign people's aggressive and violent behaviour is, thus, expected and justified:

-He came from Russia, it (violence) is in his blood, the same with Albanians , Armenians etc, it is the only way to solve their differences, to attack... (girl, 15)

-Let me tell you about the Russians... some are.. .I haven't met worse people and most of the time they are the ones to be blamed" (girl, 14)

In other cases, pupils suggest that those of their classmates who are of different cultural origin are aggressive in character or that aggression is something that defines foreign people. As A. Bibus (1992) suggests, it usually has to do with lack of self control:

-A pupil from another country may get the slightest joke wrong (boy, 15)

-She was very irritable... if you would do the slightest thing to her, she would start a fight right away (girl, 16)

Moreover, it is often considered that violence and aggression is “natural” because it stems from the migrants’ culture and civilization. In this case the Greek civilization is obviously the predominant one and the superior:

-Culture and history of each country in general show (reveal) the personality characteristics of the people... because... Greeks as Greeks share some common characteristics, share a history and they also share experiences... They may also have common behaviours. In some countries, violence in the streets may be common ... Some countries may not be developed enough so people (of these countries) do not know other ways (besides violence) to solve a conflict (girl, 16)

This sense of superiority is also reflected in the cases where the aggression and hostility of foreign people is attributed to their ways of socialization including the music they hear:

-It depends on how he grew up... what principles he was addressed to ... what he has gotten from his family...(girl, 16)

-Most of the times it is them to be blamed. Because they hear some music... some music.. and ok... they hear it and they get crazy, I don't know...(boy, 14)

-Rap... hip-hop ...something like that... they hear this and they think ... they want to imitate them (girl, 14).

The above superiority is also reflected in the cases where the participants attribute aggression and violence to the anti social behavior of foreigners. In these cases, pupils construct images of “otherness” where violence and hostility are predominant:

In this context, foreigners may be “crazy”, a drug addict or a junky.

-“in the deep ...deep level they are crazy” (girl, 14)

-He is crazy, he may kill as well (girl, 16)

-Why does he make an attack? He may be crazy... he may be a drug addict , a junky, how shall I know? A common man will not (attack) (boy, 14).

Some pupils reach to the point to draw the conclusion that foreign people often do not hesitate to kill or to carry guns:

-This group of children are in a gang... they may even have killed someone (boy, 14)

-They may bring them in (the guns) from their country (boy, 14)

Finally, some of the participants suggested that foreign people try to play it “cool” so they exercise violent behaviour and they threaten the native Greeks:

-They play it cool... wise guys ... all the time... It is us and nobody else (girl, 15)

-They play it wise guys... wild guys in the city (girl, 14)

-They play it cool, they wear wide pants and so on and they believe they are somebody (girl, 14).

It seems from the above, that while arguing about aggression of the “other” , pupils construct through their discourse, a context in which this type of behaviour is purely “natural”, and as such, it is justified and expected. Pupils also reach to the point to attribute to their foreign classmates the capacity to kill, reflecting, thus, upon them their fears and worries.

From the above, we might say that these explanations show that accurate knowledge about different cultures is lacking. So the young participants of this study, trying to understand the social reality they live in, construct images of “otherness” which are quite stereotypical. It is true that both school and the media fail to inform people of the diversity of cultures and when they do so, they often offer only a stereotypical portrayal. Moreover, as Jorge Delva-Taui’ili (1995) suggests, the prevalent attitudes are quite stereotypical. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear people speak of these factors as if they were cultural characteristics common to all the members of a particular ethnic group (p.84).

(2) Migrants’ violence as a psychological phenomenon (determined by the psychological difficulties migrants are faced with)

Some students attributed violent or hostile behaviour of their foreign classmates to the difficulties migrant children are faced with.

Such difficulties have to do with their migration *per se* or the feelings of inferiority they hold or difficulties of adjustment:

-They feel bad that they left their country and they should express that in some way

(girl, 16)

-If someone comes from another country...depends on how he feels, if he feels inferior, and most times they feel inferior, they will either withdraw into themselves or they would like to show that they are there. So they simply get into a fight in order to show they are there (girl, 16)

-She was tired of changing schools, she was suffocated because of that, that's why her personality has turned to be like that (girl, 16)

According to children's views, these difficulties have also to do with the foreign students' personal problems or family reasons:

-Because these children have grown up without any parents (boy, 15)

-Their parents have either died or left them (their children) and met them again after a while(boy, 15)

-Let's say that some children who have grown basically alone, they end up like that. ... They are out of the line (i.e. they don't live normal lives)...and if a child is like that until, let's say, the age of 6 or 7, then he may have some kind of a psychological problem (boy, 16)

On one hand, one might argue that the above views may reflect empathy and understanding. On the other hand, though, this is not always the case. Sometimes, it is suggested that parents are the ones to be blamed for their children's behavior but it is implied that the different culture of both parents and children is the one that is violent :

-Parents may fight in the house, they may swear at each other, so the child imitates them (boy, 14)

-Or they (parents) do not pay any attention to them (to the children) so they (children) go out unattended (girl, 14).

- The only way they can solve their differences is to get into a fight (girl, 16)

In other cases, it is implied that poverty results in violence:

- *That is to say that whoever is of a low socio-economic status and a low education, has always the tendency to become aggressive and violent” (girl, 16)*
- *I mean that it is the level of education that is responsible for all that (girl, 16)*
- *I believe that more violent are the people of low socio-economic status (girl , 16)*

(3) Migrants’ violence as a social phenomenon (based in their interaction with native greeks)

Violence as a social phenomenon was discussed in several ways. Pupils argue that native Greeks are negative towards foreigners and consequently, foreign people’s aggressive behavior reflects their reaction towards this hostility. Within this context, two explanations were given:

(1) Pupils, while arguing about violence and aggression perceived foreign people’s aggression as a reaction towards native Greeks’ racism and prejudice:

- *..” a Greek insults him, he damps him down for his being a foreigner and, so, the other person reacts to that... (boy, 15)*
- *If a guy who is a foreigner, had been attacked by a Greek in the past may attack someone who happens to be Greek, because he believes that all Greeks are the same and that all Greeks are racists. So he believes that this guy (the victim) is like all Greeks (boy, 15)*
- *Because of racism probably... Her personality has maybe changed... she probably became like that... so that’s why she probably loses her temper so often (girl, 16)*
- (2) Participants often attributed the foreign students’ aggression to the Greeks’ abuse of them.
- *He does not know the language well, pupils often pull his leg because of that and he doesn’t like that, he shouts, he gets nervous and he wants to jump on them... to hit them (boy, 16)*

- *He does not speak greek fluently , they behave to him differently, they isolate them (girl, 6)*
- *If you are a foreigner, they often pull your leg, they abuse you, they take advantage of you and you cannot neglect your feelings because you don't speak the language (boy, 15)*

From the above, it seems that pupils do not often attribute violence and aggression to “place of origin”. When they do, however, they try to understand this phenomenon and make sense of it. In their attempt, they offer explanations which are either too simplistic or quite elaborated. It also seems that their views often reflect existing stereotypes or they reflect explanations that often offered either by adults or mass media. Some of these explanations are relevant to those offered by the different theoretical approaches. According to Rigby (2004) five theoretical explanations have been offered explaining violence in schools (aggression as an outcome of individual differences, aggression as a developmental process, aggression as a socio-cultural phenomenon, aggression as a response to peer pressure within the schools and aggression from the perspective of restorative justice (p. 289).

(II) the association of violence and aggression with masculinity.

During the focus group discussions, it was repeatedly found that the teenagers considered violence and aggression as an exclusively masculine type of behavior.

“I believe that men are more aggressive...” (boy, 16)

“I believe that men more than women, act out their aggression using violence...” (boy, 15)

“Men are much more aggressive,, more impulsive; they are hot tempered” (girl, 16)

It seemed therefore, that while arguing about male aggression, both boys and girls constructed through their discourse, a context in which this type of behavior is purely masculine, and as such, it is justified.

Within this context, acting out violence against women, was considered to be self evident. Consequently, both boys and girls, through their discourse, constructed an image of gender relations,

according to which the male power and authority are exercised even through violence whereas women are in a submissive position.

«They want to show that they are somebody, I am the man, you are the woman and you have to listen to me». (girl, 16)

«The women are relatively weaker, and this makes the men to take advantage of them in one way or another...». (Boy, 15)

Victims or aggressors? The ways in which adolescents place themselves in relation to violent and aggressive behavior

Especially interesting are the ways in which the teenagers of our sample place themselves in relation to violence and aggression, meaning whether or not they place themselves in the position of the victim or the aggressor. Significant differences between boys and girls emerged in this phase of the discussion.

When trying to define violence and aggression, the boys often saw these types of behavior as an action and perceived themselves as the protagonists of these actions.

«In school, you lash out and your violence comes out there...and you commit violent actions...». (boy, 15)

«...it might be disrespect for the teacher... trying to go against them...or against your fellow students...it could be accusing them for your problems and of course it could also be vandalism...». (boy, 16)

On the contrary, with girls, there was a tendency to associate violence and aggression with coercion or threat. Girls, during the conversation, perceived violence as something that it is done to you because it is inflicted on you. They also placed themselves in the victim's position.

«...it is something that happens without your will...». (girl, 16)

«something that is inflicted upon you...». (girl, 16)

«something that they do to you, something that exists...». (girl, 14)

Even though girls mostly discussed the issue in this context, it is clear that not all the girls talked from the side of the victim. In the cases where girls did not put themselves in this position, they discussed violence and aggression as neutral observers rather than as participants of violent actions.

«When people are insecure or fear others, they become aggressive». (girl, 15)

«Violence is something that exists...it is catastrophic, it could be vandalism ...it could be violence between people». (girl, 16)

Findings show that both boys and girls who participated in the study, appear to relate aggression and violence with masculinity. It seems, therefore, that adolescents' perceptions reflect the dominant ideologies in both their school and social environment. Moreover, the young people who participated in the study, seem to construct a hegemonic representation of masculinity in which violence and aggression are the major characteristics. [i.e. in other words, the «dominant and dominating forms of masculinity which claim the highest status and exercise the greatest influence and authority»] (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, p. 119).

Through their discourse, they further construct, a social reality in which gender relations are shaped as relations of power and submission. In this context, male violence against the women is justified and legitimate..

In sum

Given the fact that more and more studies come to the conclusion that violence is widespread in schools and that most victims are foreigners (Delva-Tauili'ili,1995), or often such violence is carried out by males (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1990), what do the above

findings imply about school education? Is a consequence of these beliefs the development of a cultural tolerance to different sorts of violence against the “other” and against women?

Research in education should focus on intervention programs which incorporate cultural and social factors in the prevention of youth’s aggressive behavior in the school setting. Moreover, it should aim not only at the empowerment and reinforcement of the girls in the educational context, but to the broadening of masculine identities as well.