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Self-esteem and hopelessness as predictors of emotional difficulties: A cross-sectional study among adolescents in Kosovo

Naim Fanaj^{a*}, Erika Melonashi^a, Fleura Shkëmbi^a

^a*Bulevardi "Gjergj Fishta" Nd.70, H.1, 1023, Tirana; +37744192053*

Abstract

The growing prevalence of emotional difficulties among adolescents represents an important public health issue for several countries, especially those with relatively young population such as Kosovo. The main research question of the present study is whether self-esteem and hopelessness are significant predictors of emotional difficulties among adolescents in Kosovo. The purpose of the study was to investigate the level of emotional difficulties among adolescents in Kosovo and determine whether self-esteem and hopelessness serve as significant predictors of these difficulties. Participants were 1162 adolescents aged between 11 and 20 years old ($M=16.37$; $SD=1.58$); in terms of gender composition, there were girls 593 (51 %), boys 535 (46 %). The measures used included the Albanian versions of The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman,1997), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg,1965) and the Hopelessness scale for children (Kazdin et al, 1986). Results indicated that 16.3% of participants reported abnormal levels of emotional difficulties, 52.7 % reported low self-esteem and 19.6 % reported high hopelessness levels. Emotional difficulties were significantly predicted by hopelessness ($\beta= .272$, $p<.00$), self-esteem ($\beta= .112$, $p<.00$), gender ($\beta= .258$, $p<.00$), and residence ($\beta= .128$, $p<.00$). Together these variables explained 17% of the variance in emotional difficulties. The study found relatively high levels of emotional difficulties especially in mid-adolescence. Findings suggested that self-esteem and hopelessness might partially explain emotional difficulties. Despite the low statistical power of findings it is important to investigate these relationships in future research, especially when considering that more than half the sample reported low self-esteem and almost 1/5 reported high hopelessness.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +37744192053; fax: +0-000-000-0000 .
E-mail address: naimfanaj@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Emotional regulation represents an important developmental milestone in adolescence (Kim, Riser, & Deater-Deckard, 2011). Indeed this developmental stage is characterized by frequent and extreme emotional shifts between positive and negative emotions; also research suggests that in fact adolescents tend to experience more negative emotions and are more emotionally responsive to life events (Adams & Berzonsky, 2003). Depressive symptoms also tend to be frequent especially among women and associations have been found with low self-esteem and hopelessness (Rosenblum & Lewis, 2003). Kostiuk and Fouts (2002) suggest that poor emotional regulation negatively affects all dimensions of quality of life.

1.1 The prevalence of emotional difficulties in adolescence

Epidemiological research findings worldwide suggest 9-12% of adolescents experience strong emotional symptoms which negatively affect every day functioning (Egger & Angold, 2006; Costello, Egger, & Angold, 2005). A rise in the prevalence of emotional problems has been reported across several countries (Kelleher et al 2000; Rimpelä et al 2006; Sweeting & West 1998). This aspect represents an important public health issue since it affects almost ¼ of youth population (Sawyer et al., 2000; Egger and Angold, 2006). Additionally relationships have been found between emotional dysregulation in adolescence and depression, anxiety or substance abuse (Hilt, Hanson, & Pollak, 2011). Most important emotional problems experienced during adolescence might continue later in life too (Bosquet and Egeland, 2006; Kessler et al., 2005). Borderline emotional problems during early adolescence increase the probability of developing psychiatric disorders later in life (Jaffee et al., 2002; Fergusson, Horwood, & Boden, 2006; Clark, Rodgers, Caldwell, Power, & Stansfeld, 2007). Despite high prevalence rates there is great practical difficulty in identifying emotional problems in children and adolescents (Costello & Angold, 2006) also due to the blurred fine lines between normality and disorder (Rutter, 2003).

1.2 Factors explaining emotional problems

A vast amount of research has examined the pathways, mechanisms, risk factors, and protective factors in the development of emotional problems (Gutman & Sameroff, 2004). Emotional development is influenced by complex interactions of multiple personal and contextual factors (Skuse, Bruce, Dowdney, & Mrazek, 2011). Personal factors include genetic makeup (Rutter, 2006); temperament (De Pauw & Mervielde, 2010); cognitive skills (Hodapp & Dykens, 2009); self-esteem (Harter, 2006); social cognition (Sharp, Fonagy & Goodyer, 2008) and moral development (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006).

Contextual factors include attachment (Kerns, 2008), parental styles (Parke & Buriel, 2008), parent-child cohesiveness (Stein, Rachmandani & Murray, 2008), family functioning (Masten, Shaffer, Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006), school environment (Sellstrom & Bremberg, 2006), relationships with peers (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006) and the broad socio-cultural context (Jenkins, 2008).

1.3 Self-esteem and emotional difficulties

Self-esteem is a broadly investigated topic in social science research in general, and clinical or adolescent psychology research in particular (Thomaes, Poorthuis, & Nelemans, 2011; Mruck, 2006). Studies have identified self-esteem as an important determinant of emotional well-being (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; Peterson & Steen, 2002). Self-esteem might serve as a protective factor, as a moderator, mediator or simply a result of emotional well-being or difficulties (Lacković-Grgin, 2000; Lee & Hankin, 2009; Tambelli, Laghi, Odorisio, & Notari, 2012; Laghi, Pallini, D'Alessio, & Baiocco, 2011; Myers, 2013).

An increasing number of longitudinal studies suggests that low self-esteem predicts depression later in life (Orth, Robins, & Meier, 2009; Orth, Robins, Trzesniewski, et al., 2009; Kamkar, et al., 2012; MacPhee & Andrews, 2006; Millings et al, 2012; ; Sowislo & Orth, 2012). Also low self-esteem has been associated with anxiety symptoms and somatic complaints while high self-esteem has been considered as an important buffer against anxiety (Millings et al., 2012; Morley & Moran, 2011; O'Brien, Bartoletti, & Litzel, 2006). Cross-sectional research studies have reported correlations of medium to high statistical power between self-esteem and anxiety (Lee & Hankin, 2009).

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