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Social perception of aggression by high school students

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Abstract

Our research originated from the desire and need to study the phenomena of aggression and violence.. This study focuses on the teenager perception of aggression and violence as manifested in high school. The data used in this study was collected from 60 teenagers between 16 and 19 years old, from two high schools in Constanta County, Romania. The results indicate an insufficient level of information and education among teenagers regarding aggression and violence in high school. Any remedial program should address issues that lead to dysfunctional or broken families as a main cause of adolescent aggression and violence.

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Keywords: Aggression, violence, teenager

1. Problem Statement

Most of us recognize the fact that in contemporary society aggression has become a commonly observed phenomenon. However, human aggression is not new, as violent and aggressive behaviors have always constituted intrinsic parts of the human condition. As Paunescu (1994) indicated, humans possess a certain dose of potential aggressive behavior, necessary for self-defense and promotion of self-interest in the context of social pressures. Aggression can be analyzed from different angles, considering the various causes leading to it, and taking into account its various forms of manifestation. Bushman & Anderson (2002) defined aggression as an intentional behaviour with the intent of producing certain damage (to hurt, to destroy, or to cause material damage).

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Adolescence is a period of strong crisis caused by leaving childhood, which leads to physiological troubles, unbalances and oftentimes social exclusion. Oftentimes, the “adolescence crisis” is the result of multiple affective dysfunctions and behaviour deviations. All these can lead to violence in the form of aggression. What makes children act aggressively? Part of the answer may lie in the way they process social information- what features of the social environment they pay attention to, and how they interpret what they perceive. When highly aggressive children become emotionally aroused, memories of the past incidents may distort their current perceptions, so that they misinterpret others’ intentions toward them. This faulty processing can lead to aggressive behaviour (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996). Children who engage in hostile also called reactive) aggression tend to have a hostile bias, they frequently see other children as trying to hurt them, and they strike out angrily either in retaliation or in self- defense (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1996; Waldman, 1996). Since people often to become hostile toward someone who acts aggressively toward them, a hostile bias may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, setting in a motion a cycle of aggression. Children who engage in instrumental or proactive aggression see the world quite differently. They view force or coercion as effective ways to get what they want, and they act deliberately not out of anger. In social learning terms, they are aggressive because they expect to be rewarded for it, and when they are rewarded, their belief in the effectiveness of aggression is reinforced (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Adults can help children curb hostile aggression by teaching them how to recognize when they are getting angry and how to control their anger. Instrumental aggression tend to stop if it is not rewarded. Above all, aggressive children need help in altering the way they process social information, so they do not interpret aggression as either justified or useful (Crick & Dodge, 1996).

Children who grow up observing aggressive models often imitate the behaviours they see. Different cultures model, reinforce and evoke differing tendencies toward violence. For example, crime rates are higher in countries marked by a great disparity between rich and poor show how cultures can also differ within a country. (Triandis, 1994; Nisbett, 1993).

Several factors can have a negative impact on the behavior of teenagers. The causes of aggression are complex, however two distinct categories can be identified: (i) psycho-individual factors springing from the depth of human individuality (e.g., mental perturbations, negative feelings, temperamental dispositions, intelligence level and emotional control) and, (ii) external factors generated by the socio-economic and educational background in which an individual is brought up (e.g., aggression within the family, severe parental discipline, exposure to the aggression of peers, exposure to violence through mass-media, video games or gambling, and extended exposure to violence in real life). Adolescent aggression oftentimes represents a benign problem, such problem vanishing with the maturing of the aggressive teenager into adulthood. The positive outcome of this process, in which the behaviour problems of the adolescence are overcome, significantly depends on the support that the aggressive teenager finds within his environment (i.e. family, friends, school, and community). Aggression and violence within the Romanian school environment are general phenomena. In a research involving 909 Romanian teaching institutions, violent behaviour was found in approximately 75% of the cases investigated according to the statements of school principals. When inquiries extended to school councils, aggressive and violent behaviour was reported in 97% of the cases investigated (Jigau et al. 2006).

2. Research plan

2.1. Purpose of Study

Aggressive behaviour in teaching institutions represents a detrimental factor that not only negatively impacts the successful completion of the educational process, but also has a negative impact on the society at large. This research activity was conducted between November 2012 - December 2012, and its objectives were: characterize the manner in which aggression is perceived by teenagers; identify aggressive behaviors which occur more frequently, and identify the causes of aggressive behavior.

2.2. Participants

The research pool was comprised of 60 students at two high schools in County Constanta.

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