

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

Despina Sakka,
Prof. in Social Psychology
Department of Primary Education,
Democritus University of Thrace

Aim of the study

- 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.

An issue of special importance

- during the last decades, there has been a continuing increase of migrants in Europe as well as in other countries outside of Europe which have traditionally accepted migrant workers
- The increasing number of migrants has changed the composition of the student populations and more schools are facing the challenge of meeting the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse body of students
- violence and aggression in schools tends to become an important social problem.
- It is also known that schools, one way or another, in modern societies do reinforce violence indirectly
- In Greece, more and more studies have shown that aggression and bullying are quite common behaviors in schools more than 10% of the secondary-school students reported that they have been systematically bullied whereas 35% were concerned over being victimized in their schools.
- Bullying in the Greek schools has been related to a number of factors.

- 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 three studies which aim at the understanding of (a) violence and aggression in the contemporary multicultural school (Sakonidis, Klothou & Piniou, 2000) and (b) native and non-native children's views on violence and hostility in schools (Sakka, unpublished data; Psalti, Sakka & Zafeiropoulos, 2006, Psalti & Konstantinou, 2007).
- In the above studies pupils are asked to either report their experiences or indicate directly their views on the issue of violence in relation to the "other".
- How, though, do pupils explain this relationship (or the lack of a relationship) between the two? How, consequently, do they understand their co-existence with the "other" in school?

Method

- Sample: 53 adolescents (30 boys and 23 girls) who attend the 3rd grade of High School and the 1st grade of Lyceum
- Qualitative data
 - 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.
- 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 people of different cultural background.
- Data were tape recorded
- A thematic analysis was used in order to analyze the data

Results

- A point of attention:
 - during the focus group discussion, it was repeatedly found that teenagers do not necessarily associate violent and aggressive behaviours with the pupils' place of origin. When, however, the subject is being brought up for some reason, they attribute migrant peoples' aggressive behavior to a broad series of reasons which range from the general statement "it is always their fault" to quite elaborated explanations.

Three broad types of explanations pupils give

- (1) Migrants' violence as a natural or biological phenomenon (i.e., determined by nature or biological factors)
- (2) Migrants' violence as a psychological phenomenon (related, for example, to the psychological difficulties migrants are faced with)
- (3) Migrants' violence as a social phenomenon (based, for example, in their interaction with native greeks)

(1) Migrants' violence as a **natural or biological phenomenon** (i.e., determined by nature or biological factors)

(a) this type of behavior is in 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)*

(b) pupils attributed migrants' violence and aggression to biological factors

- ***-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)***
- ***-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)***
- ***-“in the deep ...deep level they are crazy” (girl, 14)***
- ***-He is crazy, he may kill as well (girl, 16)***
- ***-This group of children are in a gang... they may even have killed someone (boy, 14)***
- ***-They play it cool... wise guys ... all the time... It is us and nobody else (girl, 15)***

(2) Migrants' violence as a **psychological phenomenon** (related, for example, to the psychological difficulties migrants are faced with: migration *per se* personal or family problems, family disfunction, financial problems)

- **-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)**
- **-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)**
- **-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).**
- **- 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)**

(3) Migrants' violence as a social phenomenon

- two explanations were given
 - **(a)According to the participants' accounts, violence and aggression is "natural" because they stem from the migrants' culture and civilization. In this case the Greek civilization is obviously the predominant one:**
 - *-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)*
 - *-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).*

- **(b) 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)*
- *- 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)*
- *- 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)*

Discussion

- the multicultural character of contemporary Greek society seems to have an impact on students and on their views of the “other”.
- (a) this new character has pushed pupils to think of themselves in relation to the “other” and has challenged the ways they think of their coexistence with people of different cultural backgrounds.
- Our results point to the need, therefore, for school interventions aiming at discussing the issue of cultural diversity in the public school classrooms.
 - necessity for intervention programs which will not take into consideration only the educational needs of the students of a different cultural background, as has often been the case so far, but the psychological needs of *all* students of both the dominant and the nondominant groups.

- (b) our data also revealed the contradictions and the conflicting views of the young adolescents who participated in the study.
- Need, thus, for intervention programs in the classroom should take into consideration these conflicting views and provide the opportunity to the participant students to reflect upon them as well as to recognize and challenge them.
- This knowledge of one's own beliefs may lead to the empowerment of students so that they will be able to function effectively in a culturally diverse classroom

Conclusion

- Necessity for research in education to focus on intervention programs which will incorporate cultural and social factors in the prevention of youth's aggressive behavior in the school setting. Moreover, it seems that it is important to put special emphasis on the broadening of students' attitudes towards the ethnic "other".
- As Delva-Tauili'ili (1995) suggests, *in order to be effective, interventions to prevent violence in schools need to take into consideration the social and cultural factors affecting groups and group relations.*