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.

A total of 53 non-migrant 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, it seems 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. Moreover, adolescents' views seem to reflect the dominant ideologies in both their school and social environment. Results are further discussed with reference to the ethnic stereotypes that are emerging in the adolescents' discourse.

KEY WORDS: violence in relation to the "other" , adolescents' views, aggression, different cultural background,

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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 students' views on violence and aggression in relation to cultural diversity at school are of special importance because, one one hand, during the last decades, there has been a continuing increase of migrants in Europe (Johansson et al., 2007, Reid & Reich, 1992 among others) as well as in other countries outside of Europe which have traditionally accepted migrant workers (Kivisto, 2002, Liao, 2001, McLeod & Yates, 2003 and others). 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 (Gonzales, 1993, Lucas & Schecter, 1992, Suarez-Orozco, 2001, Taylor & Quintana, 2003).

On the other hand, it is well documented that violence and aggression in schools tends to become an important social problem (Rigby, 2002). More specifically, 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, thus, 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, Morita Junger-Tas, Olwens, Catalano,

& Slee (Eds.), 1999, 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. (Baldry, 1998, Arora, 1996, Berthold & Hoover, 2000) .

In Greece, more and more studies have shown that aggression and bullying are quite common behaviors in schools although less frequent than in other countries such as USA or UK (Smith, Nika & Papasideri, 2004). Although there are no statistics on the subject to 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 (Kalliotis, 2000, Papastylianou, 2000, Boulton, Karellou, Lanity, Manousou & Lemoni, 2001, Andreou, 2001, 2004, Andreou & Smith, 2002, Andreou & Metallidou, 2004, Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2007, Smith, et al, 1999). According to a more recent study, for example, 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. Furthermore, bullying seems to take place in locations where there is limited teacher attendance (e.g. schoolyards, on the way back home) and bullies and victims usually avoid to mention the incident (Psalti & Konstantinou, 2007).

Furthermore, bullying in the Greek schools has been related to a number of factors. More specifically, school violence in schools has been explored in relation to factors such as locus of control, sense of self and self-efficacy as well as pupils' coping mechanisms in conflictual peer interactions (Andreou, 2001, 2004, Andreou & Metallidou, 2004, Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2007) or family factors (Dimakos, 2005, Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2007). Moreover, it has been explored in relation to gender differences (Kalliotis, 2000, Boulton, et al, 2001) or gender identity (Deliyanni-Kouimtzi & Sakka, 2005).

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).

According to Sakonidis et al. (2000), pupils' violent or aggressive behavior in the school setting has to do with a series of factors such as the type of the school subject, pupils'interests, pupils' 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 do whereas according to Psalti et al. (2006) and Psalti & Konstantinou (2007), the relation between school violence and migration status is rather weak.

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?

Within this context, the present study aims at exploring the ways in which students of the dominant group in the public school classrooms understand the issue of aggression and violence in the school context in general and in relation to the migrant status of their classmates in particular. The data were part of a students' needs-assessment program that was carried out in the context of a pilot action research program aiming at the empowerment of in-service teachers so that (a) they acquire the necessary skills and abilities to deal effectively with

the culturally diverse classroom and (b) they actively support the minority students' integration into the regular classroom[1].

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 people of different cultural background.

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

Results and Discussion

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

At this point, it should be noted that during the focus group discussion, it was repeatedly found that teenagers do not necessarily associate violent and aggressive behavious 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.

Thus, three broad types of explanations emerged:

(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)

To what extend the above explanations are relevant to those offered in the literature? Our data do not allow us to fully answer this question. According to Rigby (2002, 2005), however, 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).

(1) Migrants' violence as a natural or biological phenomenon

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 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 behavious 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)*

Moreover, pupils, often, 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. Within this context, pupils, similarly to several writers (Bibus, 1992), relate aggression 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)*

Foreigners, thus, may be "crazy", drug addicts or junkies.

-*"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" exercising violent behaviour and threatening 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. Moreover, they make gross generalizations reaching to the point to assume that violence of the "other" is innate and internal, thus, stable and unchangeable. Within this context, the young participants of the study, trying to understand the social reality they live in, construct a representation of "otherness" in which violence and aggression seem to be major characteristics. As we have noted elsewhere (Sakka, 2009), the multicultural character of contemporary Greek society seems to have pushed pupils to think of themselves in relation to the "other" and has challenged the ways children think of their coexistence with people of different cultural backgrounds.

(2) Migrants' violence as a psychological phenomenon

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 (a) their migration *per se* or (b) the feelings of inferiority they hold or (c) 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' 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 problems with their family:

-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 or the family

culture *per se*:

*-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 the low socio-economic status (i.e., poverty) of the

family relates to 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)

Once more, it becomes obvious from the above that pupils make gross generalizations.

In this case, however, generalizations seem to exaggerate the differences between Greeks and

foreigners. Moreover, their accounts seem to reflect empathy and understanding as they

attribute the "other's" violent behavior to either external (such as parents' lack of education

and low economic status, different family norms, migration problems) or psychological reasons (which are due, again to external factors, i.e.: feelings of inferiority because of migration).

Within this context, generalizations are not as broad as in the first group of accounts and pupils seem to distinguish between different groups of foreigners (i.e. those of low and high status, of low and high self esteem e.t.c.). Violence, however, is being associated with those foreigners who are of a lower socio-economic status. Pupils, thus, through their accounts, construct a more complicated social reality trying to justify what they seem to consider as "expected" (the "other's" violent and aggressive behavior) by describing relations between different sub-groups of the outgroups. To what extend their views reflect contradictory views in the broader society indicating that "Not all foreigners are violent or hostile but some of them are"? This is a question which needs further investigation. One might argue, however, that conflicting views characterize modern attitudes towards cultural diversity and that they reflect ideological dilemmas which exist in the broader society (Billing, Gondor, Edwards, Crane, Middleton & Radley, 1988).

(3) Migrants' violence as a social phenomenon

Violence as a social phenomenon was discussed in several ways. On the one hand, the participants attributed foreign people's aggressive behavior to socialization practices in their home country or in their family. On the other hand, pupils argued 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:

(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)

Within the above context, the ethnic group that pupils belong to (i.e. Greek in this case) is being described as being "superior".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).

It is well known that stereotyped judgments are not merely judgments about a group, but they are judgments about the ingroup and the relations between the ingroup and the outgroup (Tajfel, 1981, 1982). It becomes obvious from the above accounts that pupils' generalizations end up in exaggerating the differences between Greeks and the "others". Moreover, pupils' generalizations show that they consider their own group (and subsequently, their own culture) as being superior to foreigners living in Greece. Thus, pupils, through their accounts, not only show ingroup favoritism (Tajfel, 1981, 1982) but, also, construct a social reality where relations between ingroups and outgroups are unequal and hierarchical.

Pupils reach to the point to provide "facts" in their accounts in order to support their views. By doing so, they attribute to their foreign classmates the capacity to kill or use a gunfire. To what extend do these attributions reflect the participants' fears and worries.? This is a question for further investigation.

(b) Not all students, however, offer explanations as the above. Some 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)*

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)*

Once more, therefore, it seems from the above, that the young adolescents who participated in the study associate violence with the people of a different cultural background. This time, however, the participants perceive aggression as a reaction to the aggression initiated by members of the in-group. They, thus, through their discourse, construct a social reality in which relations between the ingroups and the outgroups are shaped as relations of power and submission. Within this context, the outgroups are being placed in the position of the "victim" where the ingroups are being placed in the position of the "aggressor". Whereas, in other words, in the first two groups of accounts the "other" was perceived as the protagonist of violent actions in this case he/she is placed in the victim's position where violence is being done to him/her and it is inflicted upon him/her.

In sum, agression, is being justified once more whereas "otherness" is being associated stereotypically to agression in this case as well. To what extend these accounts reflect modern racist attitudes towards the "other"? If we take into consideration that modern racists are the ones who have negative attitudes towards the ethnic or racial "other" while they avoid appearing prejudiced (McConahay, 1986), we can say that this might be the case.

Discussion

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) what do the above findings imply about school education?

Our results show that the multicultural character of contemporary Greek society seems to have an impact on students and on their views of the "other". As it was mentioned above, it seems that 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. More specifically, the analysis of data shows that students do not often associate violence and aggression with one's "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 unflexible. Do these views reflect prejudiced attutuds which exist in the wider society or the school context? Out data do not allow us to answer this question with certainty. According to Billing, Cramer, Edwards, Kniveton, Potter & Radley (1994), however, existing studies say very little about the cultural creation and transmission of stereotypes. As the authors indicate "detailed studies of the mass stereotypes of the culture are required, as well as investigations about how individuals interpret what they read in newspapers and what they see on television" (Billing et al., 1994, p.

158). More research is needed, therefore, towards this direction keeping in mind that "...reactions (of the subjects) are part of the culture as well" (Billing et al., 1994, p. 158).

Our results point to the need, therefore, for school interventions aiming at discussing the issue of cultural diversity in the public school classrooms. As it has been mentioned elsewhere (Sakka, 2009), school interventions so far have been addressed mainly to students who attend either the intercultural or the minority schools or schools with high numbers of students of a different cultural background aiming at helping foreign students to adjust to their new school environment. Our results point to the 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.

Similarly to a previous study aiming at investigating students' views on cultrual diversity (Sakka, 2009), our data also revealed the contradictions and the conflicting views of the young adolescents who participated in the study. As it was mentioned, these views may reflect ideological dilemmas that exist in the broader society (Billig et al., 1988). Moreover, they may characterize modern attitudes towards cultural diversity (Askouni, 1997); or they may reflect new racist attitudes towards the "other" (McConahay, 1986). It seems, therefore, that 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 (Adams, 1995, Arredonto, 1996, Gonzales & Darling-Hammond, 1997, Sakka & Psalti, 2004, Psalti, 2007).

Within this context, it seems necessary 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.

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