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The influence of some psychological problems and socio-demographic variables upon attitudes toward violence in adolescence

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Abstract

The aim of the this study was to evaluate the influence of different variables upon attitudes toward violence among high school students: a) gender; b) perceived academic achievement; c) emotional problems; d) conduct problems, e) attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder; f) peer problems. The study sample consisted of 564 high school students in the city of Izmir and Malatya. Participants completed The Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, Attitudes Toward Violence Scale and Information Sheet. The results, which were analyzed using Pearson correlation, one way ANOVA, t-test, and multiple regression analyses, highlighted the attitudes toward violence were differentiated gender and perceived academic achievement, also attitudes toward violence were related to emotional problems, conduct problems, and ADHD. All variables related to attitudes toward violence considered contributed to predicting attitudes toward violence ($R^2=.33$). Moreover, conduct problems better predicted attitudes toward violence than emotional problems, gender, and perceived academic achievement.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a transitional stage that involves biological, cognitive, social, and psychological changes, occurs between childhood and adulthood. The transition into adolescence begins the move toward independence from parents and the need to establish one's own values, personal and sexual identity, and the skills and competencies needed to compete in adult society. Adapting to all of these changes in relationships, social contexts, status, and performance criteria can generate great stress, feelings of rejection, and anger at perceived or real failure. On the other hand some of the adolescents live more serious problems than others. One of these serious problems is violence.

Youth violence refers to harmful behaviors that may start early and continue into young adulthood. While some of the harmful behaviors such as bullying, slapping, or hitting cause more emotional harm than physical harm,

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others such as robbery, assault, or rape, can lead to serious injury or even death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention- CDC, 2008). Moreover, it is known that violence increases dramatically in the second decade of life, peaking during late adolescence at 12 to 20 percent of all young people (Siyez, 2009). For example in 1996, students aged 12-18 were victims of approximately 255.000 nonfatal serious violent crimes at school (Kaufman et al., 1998; Cited in Thompson, 2002). A number of individual risk factors such as drug, alcohol, or tobacco use, poor grades in school, low IQ; familial factors such as poor family functioning, harsh and inconsistent discipline; peer factors such as friendship with anti-social peers; school factors such as poor grades, low school control; and community and societal factors such as poverty in community, are described in literature (CDC, 2008). At the same time it is generally accepted that attitudes have an important influence on behavior, particularly violence behaviour (Balkis, Duru & Buluş, 2005).

Positive attitudes toward violence involve perceiving violence as a useful way to deal with frustrations and to solve problems and willingness to use it under certain circumstances. On the contrary an individual perceiving violence as a counterproductive and destructive something to be avoided has a negative attitude toward violence (Harris, 2009).

1.1. Purpose

The aim of the this study was to evaluate the influence of different variables upon attitudes toward violence among high school students: a) gender; b) perceived academic achievement; c) emotional problems; d) conduct problems, e) attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); f) peer problems.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 564 high school students (303 girls, 261 boys) from in the city of Izmir and Malatya. Ages ranged from 14 to 19 years ($M= 16.38$, $SD= 1.21$). In this group, 39.7% (n=224) were 9th grade students; 23% (n=130) were 10th grade students; 17.6% (n=99) were 11th grade students; and 19.7% (n=111) were 12th grade students.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)* is a brief behavioral screening questionnaire that can be completed by the parents, teachers and youngsters. In this study self-rated version of SDQ was used. SDQ consists of 25 attributes, some positive and others negative. The 25 items are divided between 5 scales of 5 items each, generalizing scores for conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and prosocial behavior; all but the last are summed to generate a total difficulties score (Goodman, 1997). SDQ translated into Turkish by Güvenir, Özbek, Baykara, Arkar, Şentürk, İncekaş (2008). Guvenir et al. found that SDQ had a high internal consistency except the peer problem scale and SDQ was able to distinguish between the community and the clinic samples

2.2.2. *Attitudes Toward Violence Scale (ATVS)*: ATVS evaluated attitudes toward violence against others. The scale consisted of 11 statements on a four-point response format (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) resulting in a scale range of 11 to 44 with higher scores indicate a greater acceptance of attitudes toward violence against others. ATVS was developed by Blevins (2001) as the name of “experimental violence questionnaire”. Blevins’ study evaluated only face validity of the experimental violence questionnaire. Balkis Duru & Buluş (2005) investigated validity and reliability of this questionnaire for Turkish sample after that this questionnaire translated into Turkish by Balkis et al. And the questionnaire was named as Attitudes Toward Violence Scale. Cronbach alpha .74 and item total correlation changed .39 to .53. According to factor structure scale composed of one factor.

2.2.3. Demographic Questionnaire

A brief questionnaire was composed of this study which asked students to supply their gender, grade level and perceived academic achievement.

2.3. Procedure

After permission from the school principals, the instruments were administered in classrooms by the researchers. The students were told about the purpose of the research that the information they provided would be secured and they were free to participate into the research. All of the students accepted to participate in the study. It takes approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete the measures.

2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, t-test, One-way Anova, and multiple regression analysis were used to examine the data regarding sample. And statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 15.0. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

Mean scores, and standard deviations for the ATVS for girls and boys are given in Table 1. Also two-tailed t test results given in this table.

Table 1. Means and SD for scores on ATVS for girls and boys

Attitudes Toward Violence Scale	Girls (n=303)	Boys (n=261)	t-test	p value
M	18.67	22.43	6.65	<.001
SD	6.20	7.29		

Girls' scores ranged from 11 to 41, with a mean score of 18.67 (SD=6.20) also boys scores ranged from 11 to 44, with a mean score of 22.43 (SD=7.29). A t-test was performed to test whether there was a significant differences in average scores between girls and boys. It was found that there were significant differences between girls and boys ($t=6.65$, $p<.001$). Boys were more accepting attitudes toward violence than girls.

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to ascertain differences in grade level and perceived academic achievement on attitudes toward violence.

Table 2. Descriptive and Group Comparison Statistics for ATVS

Variables	n	M	SD	F	p value
Grade					
9 th grade	224	21.75	6.72	4.68	<.01
10 th grade	139	20.32	6.40		
11 th grade	99	18.84	6.09		
12 th grade	111	20.21	7.34		
Perceived Academic Achievement					
Higher	283	20.15	6.80	4.06	<.05
Moderate	229	20.62	6.21		
Lower	52	23.03	8.08		

According to grade level, the mean attitudes toward violence scores as follows: 9th grade, $M= 21.75$, $SD= 6.72$; 10th grade, $M= 20.32$, $SD= 6.40$; 11th grade, $M= 18.84$, $SD= 6.09$ and 12th grade, $M= 20.21$, $SD= 7.34$. One-way ANOVA was performed to test whether there was a significant difference in attitudes towards violence depending upon the grade level. As shown in Table 2, there was indeed a significant difference among the groups [$F_{(4-564)}=4.67$, $p<.01$]. Post hoc comparisons were made between the grade levels, using Scheffe test. Scheffe analysis revealed that 9th grade students were more accepting attitudes toward violence than 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students on the ATVS.

At the same time according to perceived academic achievement, the mean attitudes toward violence scores as follows: higher achieving students, $M= 20.15$, $SD= 6.80$; moderate achieving students, $M= 20.62$, $SD= 6.21$; and

lower achieving students, $M= 23.03$, $SD= 8.08$. One-way ANOVA was performed to test whether there was a significant difference in attitudes towards violence depending upon the perceived academic achievement. As shown in Table 2, there was indeed a significant difference among the groups [$F_{(3-564)}=4.06$, $p<.05$]. Post hoc comparisons were made between the perceived academic achievements, using Scheffe test. Scheffe analysis revealed that lower achieving students report more accepting attitudes toward violence than moderate and higher achieving students on the ATVS.

3.2. Correlations

Attitudes toward violence was positively correlated with conduct problems ($r= .50$, $p<.001$) and hyperactivity ($r= .24$, $p<.001$), and negatively correlated with pro-social activities ($r= -.31$, $p<.001$). However attitudes toward violence was not significantly associated with emotional problems and peer problems .

3.3. Regression Analysis

Table 3. Regression Analysis

Variables	Standardized Beta	R ²	t	P value
Gender	.23		6.56	<.001
Grade level	-.062		-1.73	>.05
Perceived academic achievement	-.002		-.065	>.05
Hyperactivity	.096		2.54	<.05
Conduct problems	.39		10.12	<.001
Prosocial behaviors	-.37		-2.78	<.01
		.33		

All of the variables accounted for 33% of variance in the attitudes toward violence [$F=45.28$ df 6 563]. On the variable level gender, hyperactivity, conduct problems, and prosocial behaviours statistically significant in predicted anger experience.

3. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine attitudes toward violence and psychological problems and some socio-demographic variables. Consistent with previous research (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999; Balkis et al. ; Harris, 2009) findings of this study demonstrate that attitudes toward violence scores differentiate according to gender. Boys report higher levels of attitudes toward violence than girls. At the same time this is consistent with findings that boys as a group more aggressive and violent than girls (Harris, 2009).

Regarding grade levels, statistically significant differences were found in attitudes toward violence. And 9th grade students were more accepting attitudes toward violence than 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students. On the contrary Balkis et al (2005) stated that higher grade students more accepting attitudes toward violence than lower grade students. These differences may be explained that our data was collected in fall semester, therefore 9th grade students may have been some adaptation problems and they accepting attitudes towards. But this variable did not significantly predict attitudes toward violence.

The current findings demonstrate that attitudes toward violence differentiate according to perceived academic achievement. Lower achieving students report more accepting attitudes toward violence. A possible explanation for this finding might be that students with higher levels of achievement tend to more positive attitudes schools and they might prefer use more effective solutions when they confronted with any problems. But like gender variable, grade level did not significantly predict attitudes toward violence. Although in literature poor achievement is accepted as a risk factor for violence (CDC, 2008). These differences may be explained that in our research we did not ask to students their grade point average, we asked only their perceived academic achievement.

Findings of this study show that attitudes toward violence are positively correlated with conduct problems and hyperactivity and both conduct problems and hyperactivity significantly predicted attitudes toward violence.

Similarly Stellar (1992; cited in Thompson, 2002) found that violent adolescents were missing impulse control, problem solving skills, and decision-making skills.

At the same time when attitudes toward violence are decrease pro-social activities are increased. This reinforces the importance of pro-social activities in school setting.

Following limitations of the current study should be recognized. First, the data are based on self-reports and these may be subject to reporting bias. Several limitations should be considered. Second correlation analysis does not allow causal analysis. Thus, the study does not address important issue about the development of attitudes toward violence. Third, this study was not able to capture other possible factors (family, school, social factors) which may play an important role in the development in attitudes toward violence. Future studies may be required to consider the combinations of these factors' impact on attitudes toward violence. Fourth, the sample consisted of public high school students in two cities. Thus generalization of the study is limited to this sample and these schools. On the other hand, in spite of its limitations it is one of the first studies to examine the association between attitudes toward school and psychological problems in high school students.

Findings from the present study have some implications for the prevention of attitudes toward violence. School counselors may plan consultative studies for awareness of parents and teachers regarding adolescents' psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems to be able to at least identify those adolescents need a mental health attention. Moreover, school counselors, may focus on social skills training programs.

In conclusion, this study has shed some light on psychological problems and socio-demographic factors as a predictor of attitudes toward violence.

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