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Psychopathological Symptoms and Aggressive Behaviour among High School Adolescents

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Abstract:

This study explored the relationship between psychopathological symptoms of paranoid ideation, anxiety and depression, and aggression among adolescents. Through purposive sampling 584 adolescents from 2 private schools and 2 public schools in Anambra state were selected for the study. 300(52.2%) were males while 284(47.8%) were females. Their ages ranged from 13-17 years, with a mean age of 15.09 and standard deviation of 1.46. Psychopathological symptoms scales (6-item paranoid ideation scale, 10-item anxiety scale and 13-item depressive symptoms scale) and 6-item aggressiveness scale were used in the study. Pearson product moment correlation was used as a statistical tool to test three hypotheses in the study. The first hypothesis which stated that there will be a significant positive relationship between paranoid ideation and aggression was confirmed, $r(1,584)=.31, p<.05$. The second hypothesis which stated that anxiety will have a positive relationship with aggression was confirmed, $r(1,584) = .64, p<.05$. Also, the third hypothesis which states that there will be a significant positive relationship between depressive symptoms and aggression was confirmed, $r(1,584)=0.64, p<.05$ level of significance. The need for proper mental health hygiene, and regular psychological checkup in schools was recommended.

Key words: psychological symptoms, Adolescents, Aggressive behavior

1. Introduction

The second tier academic institutions provide a very veritable ground for socialization of young people in Nigeria, especially because most children leave their homes for the first time to co-habitate, and closely associate with children from diverse backgrounds and upbringing. This level of education coincides with the adolescent stage of development of which Myers (2007) holds that peer influence is greatest. Reports abound of immoral behaviors, molestation of fellow students, disruptive competitions (even during sporting activities) and other forms of non-normative behaviors capable of inflicting both psychological and physical pain on these students.

Indeed, a recent gang activity in a secondary (high) school in Awka which claimed the life of a teenage student had made the State Government to step up counseling services and security in all secondary schools in Anambra state. However, this is more like a short-term measure. Proactive and prophylactic approach to conflicts and violence seems to hold higher promise for better outcomes. It therefore becomes appealing to search for possible predisposing factors to aggression with a view to addressing them so as to contain the impending menace.

Although researchers like Oliveus (1993), Pepler & Craig (2000), have attempted to unveil the causes of such ugly behavior among school children, there is a paucity of research on the possible implication of psychopathological symptoms especially in Africa. Hence, this study seeks to narrow this lacuna in research by, seeking to determine the relationship of some psychopathological symptoms (anxiety, depression and paranoid ideation) and aggression among adolescent students.

Essentially, the term aggression is defined as any behavior intended to harm another individual who is motivated to avoid being harmed (Baron & Richardson, 1994, Green, 1998, Dodge, 2002). When the primary goal is intentional injury or destruction of the target, the behavior is termed hostile aggression. It is distinguished from instrumental (or operant) aggression in which the attack is carried out principally to achieve a goal other than the target's injury; such as acquiring a desired resource. Most instances of hostile

aggression can also be regarded as affective aggression in that they are emotional reactions to an aversive state of affairs which tend to be targeted towards the perceived source of distress, but may be displaced onto other people or objects (APA, 1998).

Aggressiveness is manifested in such behaviors as kicking, hitting or shoving others, and using weapons or knives, verbal attack, insulting, humiliating and swearing at others, hating, holding grudges against, excluding, and isolating others (Uygun, 2001). Aggressive behaviors are motivated by competitiveness, anger, hostility, and threat to ego or other values.

Adolescents are persons in the developmental period of adolescence which is the period from puberty to the beginning of adulthood. Adolescence, usually begins with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics (usually between 11 and 13 years of age), continues through teenage and terminates legally at the age of majority usually 18 years (Coleman, 2005). Passer and Smith (2001) observe that adolescents show peculiar social thinking, which is characteristically egocentric. Adolescents who think more egocentrically tend to be depressed and more likely to underestimate the negative consequences of risky behaviors, such as sex without contraception, drunk driving or use of psychoactive substances (which often predispose them to aggressive behaviors). These adolescents are also over sensitive to social evaluations.

Indeed, adolescents are at the middle state of personality development which, according to Freud (1903), starts at the genital stage of psychosexual development. During this period, there is a re-energization of sexual and aggressive desires which, if not well directed may lead to psychological fixation. Further, Horney (1939) in her theory of personality stressed what she refers to as "Neurotic needs and the idealized self". She is of the view that children in the face of basic anxiety develop certain defense attitudes or strategies that permit them to cope with the world and afford certain measures of gratification. It is deducible and hence a theoretical assumption of this study that psychopathological symptoms increase adolescents' feelings of insecurity, recourse to primitive defense mechanisms, therefore to aggression.

Psychopathology means "pathology of the mind and is generally used as a term to describe abnormal behavior (Oltmanns & Emery, 1995). It represents patterns of behavior or thought processes that are abnormal or maladaptive in this sense, it is sometimes synonymous with mental ill-health or mental disorder. Psychopathologies consist of disorders ranging from those that cause mild distress to those that severely impair persons' ability to function (Cohen, Alec, Kelein-man & Arthur, 2009). Psychopathological conditions that are of interest to this study are depressive symptoms, paranoid ideation and anxiety which are perceived to be wide spread in the general population, yet many a time not reported.

Anxiety is defined as emotional state, in which people feel uneasy, apprehensive and fearful. People usually experience anxiety about events they cannot control or predict or about events that seem threatening or dangerous (Cohen, Alex, Keleinman & Aruthus, 2009). Too little anxiety or too much anxiety can cause problems. People with too much anxiety often suffer from anxiety disorders.

Depression on the other hand, can be defined as a mental illness in which a person experiences deep unshakable sadness and diminished interest in nearly all activities (Richard, 2004). People also use the term depression to describe the temporal sadness, loneliness or blues that everyone feels from time to time. However, in contrast, to normal sadness, severe depression, also called major depression can dramatically impair a person's ability to function in social situations and at work. People with major depression have feelings of despair, hopelessness and worthlessness, as well as thoughts of committing suicide (Cohen & David, 2009).

Paranoid ideation, as another predictor variable in this study, is seen as irrational fear and avoidance of objects, places and situations (Omoluabi, 1997). This situation is also known as paranoia which is considered a threat belief in which the person perceives that others have intentions to harm them now or in the future with little or no supporting evidence (Freeman & Garety, 2000, McKay, Langdon & Coltheart, 2006). These beliefs appear to be accompanied by considerable anxiety, worry and behavioral avoidance (Freeman & Garety, 2003, Freeman, Garety & Kwipers, 2001, Freeman, 2007). Such avoidance behavior may occur in form of aggression. Kidd (2007), and Batmangheligh (2006), report that depression has been found to be predominant among homeless adolescents. Freud (1929), also theorized that anxiety neurosis is a fundamental part of human personality.

According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard & Miller, 1939; Berkowitz, 1993), aggression becomes apparent when humans perceive that means of satisfying pressing needs are being denied: biosocial and economic denials. Frustration-aggression hypothesis as basis for explaining human motivational state and destructive pattern of responses has been elaborated by Ugwu-Okorie (2001) and Gbolahan (2003). These authors state emphatically that the occurrence of aggressive behavior always pre-supposes the existence of frustration and contrariwise, that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression. Olabisi (2003), elaborated on this view when he pointed out that in the face of frustration, aggression is displaced elsewhere, (usually to some less threatening object or to oneself) when it is impossible or dangerous to direct the aggression toward the frustrating event.

Again, based on the environmentalist's perspective (Sarojini, 2007), behavior is to a great extent influenced by prevailing circumstances in society. To a biologist or environmentalist, the concept is by far the rule of nature which visualizes the concept of variation in species and evolution of new types of behavior in organisms as a reaction to extreme changes in the immediate environment in which the organisms find themselves. It is simply a reaction to negative forces, thus calling for survival strategies.

In the context of this study, it is valid to propose that aggression among adolescents as seen presently is a product of series of events in the life of our nation over the last two or three decades. The protagonists of environmentalist perspectives assume that the current level of school cultism, violence and aggression is a consequence of the breakdown of social, economic and cultural norms of the larger society. Under this type of excruciating social reality, students and youths generally, are caught in the "age of anxiety" that forces them to constantly challenge and narrow the wide generation gap that separates them from adults.

Several empirical studies aimed at identifying a direct relationship between aggressiveness and anxiety, stress and anger had been undertaken. Freeman, Sears and Carlsmith (1998), in their study found that adolescents with high anxiety scores also scores high on aggressiveness. Karabiyik (2003), established the presences of a positive relationship between trait anxiety levels and a tendency

towards aggressiveness among university students in Turkey. Lopez and Tharman (1936), and Stern (1999), in their studies found that youngsters with a tendency towards aggressiveness also had a high chronic anxiety and anger levels. Kassinove and Tatrata (2002), in their study of adolescents found that in addition to anxiety and stress, anger also had a significant effect on aggressiveness. Furthermore, Tor and Sargin (2005), found that students' anger levels were high in schools where aggressiveness is a common behavior and that these students had a greater tendency toward violence. Smith and Ashiabi (2007), studied 201 female students aged from 9 to 19 years, and reported high aggressiveness scores among those whose anger levels were continuously high.

2. Hypotheses

- There will be a significant positive relationship between paranoid ideation and aggression among high school students.
- Anxiety will have a significant positive relationship with aggression among high school students.
- There will be a significant positive relationship between depressive symptoms and aggression among high school students.

3. Method

- Participants: 584 adolescents from two private schools and two public schools in Awka who were selected through purposive sampling technique participated in the study. The criterion for selection of the schools were; schools with highest enrolment, co-educational, (boys and girls), then boys only, and girls only schools. 300(52.2%) were males while 284(47.8%) were females. The ages of the participants ranged from 13- 17 years with a mean age of 15.09 and standard deviation of 1.46.
- Instruments: Three domains of the symptoms distress checklist-90(SCL-90) by Derogatis Lipman and Covi (1977): 10-item anxiety scale, 13- item depression scale and 6-item depression scale, joined to items on demographics on a form, constituted the instrument used for the study.

4. Procedure

After duly obtaining the permission of the management of the schools to conduct the study, the researchers with the help of staff appointed by the Principals of the schools, administered the questionnaire to the participants. Out of 1600 copies distributed, 584 were found valid and utilized for collation and analysis of data.

Design & Statistics

This is a correlational design study. The data collected were analyzed using pearson product moment correlation statistic.

5. Results

N	FACTOR	MEAN	SD	DF	R.CAL	P
584	Aggressive tendency	194.33	27.87	584	.31	.00
	Paranoid ideation	37.21	10.88			

Table 1: Correlation between paranoid ideation and aggressive tendency among adolescent students
* $p < .05$

From the table, the mean scores and standard deviation for aggressive tendency and paranoid ideation are 194.33 and 27.87, and 37.21 and 10.88 respectively. Also, there was a significant positive correlation at $p < .05$, $r(584) = .31$. Therefore hypothesis one was upheld.

N	FACTOR	MEAN	SD	DF	R.CAL	P.
584	Aggression tendency	194.33	27.87	584	.64	.00
	Anxiety	72.24	13.90			

Table 2: Correlation between anxiety and aggressive tendency among adolescent students
* $P < .05$

From the table, the mean scores and standard deviation for aggressive tendency and anxiety are 194.33 and 27.87, and 72.24 and 13.90 respectively. Anxiety also had significant positive correlation with aggressive tendency at $p < .05$, $r(584) = .64$. Therefore, hypothesis two was upheld.

N	FACTOR	MEAN	SD	DF	R.CAL	P.
584	Aggressive tendency	194.33	27.87	584	.64	.00
	Depression	57.30	13.37			

Table 3: Correlation between depression and aggressive tendency among adolescent students
* $P < .05$

From the above table, the mean scores and standard deviation for aggressive tendency and depression are 194.33 and 27.87, and 57.30 and 13.37 respectively. Again, depressive symptoms had significant positive correlation with aggressive tendency at $p < .05$, $r = .64$. Therefore, hypothesis three was upheld.

6. Discussion

In this study, the three hypotheses tested were upheld. Aggression was found to positively correlate with paranoid ideation. The result is in consonance with the views of Freeman, and Garety (2003) who opined that paranoid beliefs appear to be accompanied by considerable anxiety, worry, and behavioral avoidance. The researchers, therefore, reasoned that paranoid ideation correlate positively with aggressive tendency because of the manifest social antecedents of ethnic, religious, and denominational distrust, hedge formation, and disruptive competition among the citizenry. The results also find an explanation in the environmentalists' views (Sarojini, 2007) that behavior is to a great extent influenced by prevailing circumstances in society.

Secondly, anxiety was found to have positively, correlated with aggression. This result is in agreement with the findings of Karabiyik (2003), who established a positive relationship between trait anxiety level and a tendency towards aggressiveness. The findings are also in line with the psychoanalytic assumptions of Freud (1903) where he reasoned that the adolescence stage of personality development is filled with re-energization of sexual and aggression drives. Also, in the views of the researchers, it could be reasoned that the positive relationship between anxiety and aggression is attributable to the fact that free floating anxiety predisposes to illogical assumptions, and faulty perceptions, hence low frustration tolerance, and aggression.

Finally, the third hypothesis which stated that there will be a significant positive relationship between depressive symptoms and aggression was also upheld. This finding aligns with the DSM IV-TR's criteria, which implies that people suffering from major depression often have feelings of despair, hopeless and worthlessness, as well as thoughts of committing suicide. It could therefore be reasoned and argued that they get despondent and highly frustrated (recall the frustration-aggression hypothesis), and that suicide represents aggression to self.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between psychopathological symptoms (paranoid ideation, anxiety and depression) and aggression among adolescents. The study confirms the prevalence of these psychopathological symptoms among high school students in Awka Nigeria. It also found a positive correlation between anxiety and aggression, depression and aggression, and paranoia and depression. It follows that these psychopathological states provoke the tendency to aggressive behavior. The research outcome highlights the urgency for improved mental health hygiene among adolescents; also, there is the need for employment of trained clinical psychologists /counselors in schools for early identification and management of all forms of psychopathologies among students. If this is achieved, the aggressive tendency among high school students will attenuate.

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