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PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM OF AUTOAGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENTS (SCIENTIFIC REVIEW)

Abstract. *This article examines the psychological aspects of autoaggression as observed among adolescents, its underlying causes and its impact on the personal psyche. Drawing on Erikson's conception of identity formation, Freud's account of the inward redirection of destructive impulses, Spranger's periodisation of adolescence and the findings of longitudinal research, the review shows that autoaggression develops gradually and results from the interaction of internal and social factors. Alongside its more visible expressions, the article also considers the everyday habits through which it may surface, as well as the forms of support available at the level of the family, the school and professional psychological assistance. The review concludes that autoaggression in adolescents cannot be reduced to a single cause or a single solution, and that only a comprehensive approach taking account of both internal and external factors can provide effective support.*

Keywords: *adolescence, autoaggression, psychological factors, emotional state, inner conflict, self-awareness, social environment, psychological support.*

INTRODUCTION

Today a growing number of psychological problems are being observed among adolescents, and among these autoaggression – an adolescent's negative attitude towards themselves – deserves particular attention. Adolescence is one of the most difficult periods in the formation of personal identity, a stage during which young

people commonly experience inner turmoil, anxiety and an unsettled relationship with themselves. As Erik Erikson observed, a person cannot truly feel “alive” without a genuine sense of their own identity, which is precisely why the search for personal identity becomes one of the most significant and painful aspects of adolescence (Erikson, 1968:167). It is during this period that a young person begins searching for themselves, trying to understand who they are and what they believe in. When this process does not go smoothly, it can give rise to inner restlessness and self-doubt. Erikson referred to this state as “role confusion”, in which adolescents feel as though they have lost themselves among others, unsure of who they really are. This very state often becomes one of the earliest triggers of autoaggression, since adolescents who do not fully understand themselves may also turn unusually harsh towards themselves. Recognising this state early and offering support is therefore of great importance for parents, teachers and psychologists alike.

MAIN PART

The causes underlying autoaggression

Autoaggression is often assumed to appear suddenly, but in reality it develops gradually over a long period. Its roots lie in feelings that accumulate inside a person without ever being released: anger, resentment, hopelessness and a sense of not being understood. Everyone encounters difficulties in life, but while some people are able to ease this burden by sharing it with others, adolescents frequently do not know whom to turn to, or hesitate to open up at all. As a result these feelings remain locked inside rather than finding an outlet, and over time they begin to work against the individual: adolescents blame themselves, grow harsh towards themselves and may even come to dislike themselves.

In his work “The Ego and the Id”, Sigmund Freud argued that two opposing forces exist within human nature – one oriented towards life, the other towards destruction. According to Freud, when this destructive force is turned not outward, against others, but inward, against the self, a person begins to blame themselves severely and becomes merciless towards themselves (Freud, 1960:42). Freud attributes this to the inner “controlling voice” of conscience: when this inner voice becomes excessively harsh and unforgiving, it can relentlessly accuse a person and turn them against themselves. This

very mechanism, as Freud described it, is considered one of the theoretical foundations of autoaggression. In Freud's view, when adolescents are unable to direct anger at another person – a parent, for example – that anger turns inward instead, because doing so feels “safer”. This process typically occurs unconsciously, and it helps to explain the origin of autoaggression.

Beyond these internal factors, another characteristic feature of adolescence is a growing inner resistance to the expectations and control imposed by adults. At times this resistance is directed not at the outside world but at the adolescent's own actions, decisions and feelings, leading them to attempt to “resolve” inner tension by blaming themselves. Psychology offers differing views on the precise age boundaries of adolescence. The German psychologist E. Spranger, for instance, placed adolescence between the ages of 13 and 19 for girls and 14 and 22 for boys, noting that a particularly intense inner crisis tends to emerge between the ages of 14 and 17, driven by the adolescent's inner urge to break free from still being treated as a “child” by adults (Spranger, 1924:66).

A long-term study conducted in New Zealand tracked the lives of some nine hundred individuals. It found that children who were mentally active and impulsive at the age of three tended to grow into more aggressive and confrontational adults by the age of twenty-one, whereas children who were passive at the age of three tended to become more cautious and indecisive after the age of eighteen (Caspi et al., 1996:1033–1039). It is worth emphasising that this very stage – when adolescents feel they are no longer quite a “child” but not yet fully an “adult” – tends to generate the greatest degree of inner conflict. As Professor E. G'oziyev observed, a person's emotional world is a continuous web of tensions, conflicts and the ongoing process of resolving them (G'oziyev, 2002:130). Consequently, if the inner conflicts typical of this age range are not properly addressed, they may gradually evolve into autoaggression.

External, social factors – not only internal ones – also play a significant role in its emergence. As Professor G'oziyev further noted, a person becomes who they are under the influence of their social environment, and it is family members, the local community and the wider public who largely shape subsequent development, with the same circumstances often affecting different adolescents in different ways (G'oziyev, 2002:130). This is echoed in the textbook “General Psychology”, which states that the family environment, parent–child relationships, conflict within the household and teacher–student relationships at school all directly shape an adolescent's character

(Shamshetova et al., 2018:204). Even genetically identical twins, raised in different social environments, may develop entirely different personalities – underscoring how family conflict, inattentive teachers or a hostile peer environment can each contribute to the social roots of autoaggression.

Forms of manifestation

Autoaggression does not always take the same form. In some adolescents it appears “actively”, through self-criticism and harsh self-directed language; in others it takes a more “passive” form, expressed as neglect of one’s own needs and emotional detachment from oneself. According to the textbook “General Psychology”, under conditions of intense inner tension a person’s behaviour may shift towards one of two extremes: excessive agitation, or, conversely, sluggishness and a loss of interest in everything around them (Shamshetova et al., 2018:223).

Beyond its more severe expressions, autoaggression can also surface through small, everyday habits – overeating under stress, chronic nail-biting (onychophagia) or hair-pulling (trichotillomania). These behaviours often reflect an adolescent’s attempt to “contain” difficult emotions they cannot express directly, channelling them instead into repetitive actions directed at their own body. An adolescent’s lack of confidence in their own abilities may also push them to present themselves as more “grown-up” than they feel, and when this underlying need goes unaddressed it can manifest as rudeness or outward aggression towards adults. In other words, adolescents who appear “rude” or “irritable” on the outside are often just as harsh towards themselves internally: external and internal aggression are frequently closely intertwined. It is also worth noting the connection between autoaggression and depression: when a parent is excessively strict or authoritarian towards an adolescent, this can provoke strong inner resistance and, in some cases, lead to depression (Nishanova, Abdullayeva & Baykunosova, 2015:10).

Recognising autoaggression and ways of providing support

Recognising autoaggression early is essential. Adolescents experiencing it often speak negatively about themselves on a regular basis, blow minor mistakes out of proportion, or show an intensification of habits such as nail-biting or overeating. Parents are typically the first to notice these signs, simply because they spend the most time with the child.

For this reason the first and most critical stage of support begins at home. According to the American psychologist Carl Rogers, a person can only truly change within an

environment of unconditional acceptance (Rogers, 1961:283); parents need to accept their adolescent along with their mistakes and flaws. This is confirmed in the manual “Psychodiagnostics and Psychocorrection of Adolescence”, which similarly notes that an authoritarian, overly strict parenting style intensifies inner resistance and depression in adolescents, while a warm, supportive relationship protects against it (Nishanova, Abdullayeva & Baykunusova, 2015:12).

After the family, the school and teachers represent the next important layer of support, since teachers can often notice changes in a student even before parents do. When support at the family and school level is not enough, the next step is professional psychological help. Using the method developed by the American psychiatrist Aaron Beck, a specialist first identifies an adolescent’s negative thought patterns – such as “I am worthless” – and then helps gradually to replace them with healthier, more realistic ones (Beck, 1976:244). Given that a substantial proportion of school-age children require exactly this kind of professional support, this approach takes on particular importance. In short, addressing autoaggression is a step-by-step process, and it is only through the combined efforts of the family, the school and, where necessary, a professional psychologist that an adolescent can be helped to overcome it.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these findings suggest that autoaggression in adolescents is a complex phenomenon that develops over time under the influence of many interacting factors. As Erik Erikson observed, it is precisely during this period that adolescents strive to understand their own identity, and when this process proves difficult, inner restlessness and self-doubt often follow. Sigmund Freud, for his part, explains autoaggression as the redirection inward of anger that was never allowed to surface.

This review has also highlighted the problem’s social roots – family conflict and a parent’s excessively strict or neglectful attitude – alongside its internal, psychological dimensions. This perspective is shared not only by researchers abroad but also by Uzbek psychologists such as G‘oziyev, Karimova and Nishanova.

Beyond its more visible manifestations, autoaggression can also appear through small habits such as nail-biting or overeating, which makes timely recognition essential. Addressing the problem begins with the family, continues with the school

and, where necessary, involves the support of a professional psychologist. Ultimately, autoaggression in adolescents cannot be reduced to a single cause or a single solution: only a comprehensive approach that accounts for both internal and external factors can pave the way to effective support.

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