

Attitude to Life of Secondary School Students versus Aggressiveness and Its Dimensions

Abstract

The article presents study results concerning secondary school students' attitudes to life, which are treated as a mechanism of revealing aggressive behaviour in interpersonal relations. The following have been used: the concept of attitudes to life (scripts) in terms of transactional analysis, the concept of attachment styles by K. Bartholomew and L.M. Horowitz and the concept of aggressiveness as emotional reactivity. Analysis of the results has shown significant relationships (negative correlation) between the image of other people and aggressiveness and its dimensions (direct, indirect and verbal aggression, resistance, emotional irritability). Self-image is negatively correlated only with emotional irritability.

Keywords: *attitude towards life, attachment styles, aggressiveness, dimensions of aggression*

Introduction

Attitude to life, which is exemplified by the attitude towards oneself and other people, can be presented as dimensions of personality reflecting self-esteem and the way of judging other people: perceiving them as trustworthy determining the willingness to establish close relationships with them. Aggressiveness can also be treated as a relatively stable personality feature to manifest aggressive behaviours, which are intentional actions aimed directly or indirectly at doing harm to others, as well as any behaviour which is the expression of aggressive emotions (Sajewicz-Radtke, Radtke, Kalka 2010: 49). Aggression results from various forms

of frustration related to the threat to self-esteem or the threat to interpersonal relationship patterns. In this context, attitudes to life, i.e. attitude towards "I" and other subjects "outside-I," may be related to manifested aggression, which is a result of experienced frustrations in both areas (self-esteem, interpersonal relationships).

The analysis of attitudes to life was based on two concepts, i.e. the transactional analysis in which Thomas A. Harris (1987, 2009) distinguished and described four attitudes to life and Kim Bartholomew and Leonard M. Horowitz's models of emotional bonds (1991: 226–244) where four attachment styles were distinguished. Attitude towards oneself and the styles describing the type of relation with others are interrelated. Basically, in the course of life experience gained by relationships with other people, a system of scripts is developed in an individual definitely determining life positions in which information about the value of self and others is contained. According to Harris (1987: 52–70; c.f. 2009) there are four main life positions, of which the first three are formed in the early childhood (they are subconscious, based on emotions and imaginations) and the fourth one is shaped by one's independent and conscious decision of auto-creation (based on thought, belief and action) being the result of the cognitive analysis of various life (relational) experiences. They overlap with the attachment styles distinguished by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991: 226–244), who indicated that the (positive and negative) self-image was correlated with the image of other people (positive and negative) as a consequence of experience gained in interpersonal relations (*ibidem*: 227) i.e.

- **PREOCCUPIED STYLE** – negative self-image and positive image of others ("I AM NOT OK – YOU ARE OK") – excessive preoccupation with relationships with other people who are perceived as a source of any kind of gratification, hence it is necessary to submit to them; search for acceptance and dependence on others, readiness to meet their expectations for fear of being rejected.
- **DISMISSIVE-AVOIDANT STYLE** – positive self-image and negative image of others ("I AM OK – YOU ARE NOT OK") – rejection or avoidance of closeness in relations with others; sense of self-sufficiency; strong need for autonomy and independence; suspicion of others' motives, questioning their honesty and good intentions.
- **FEARFUL-AVOIDANT STYLE** – negative self-image and negative image of others ("I AM NOT OK – YOU ARE NOT OK") – fear of closeness, causing defensive social withdrawal; self-uncertainty, lack of self-trust; other people are perceived as repulsive and untrustworthy; lack of sense of security caused by expected rejection.
- **SECURE STYLE** – positive self-image and positive image of others ("I AM OK – YOU ARE OK") – essential trust resulting from one's balance between intimacy and autonomy; self-perception which makes one feel worthy of love, attention and respect, while others are perceived as trustworthy, accepting and reliable; proper functioning in dependency relations (dependence on others vs. others dependant on the individual) because they do not trigger a sense of insecurity.

Aggressiveness as a personality feature is manifested in behaviour and expression of negative feelings towards the environment that is perceived as threatening. It is a syndrome of features including the following forms of aggression (Sajewicz-Radtke, Radtke, Kalka 2010: 49–50):

- DIRECT AGGRESSION: use of physical strength in order to hurt other person or a group of people.
- INDIRECT AGGRESSION: behaviour aimed at doing harm to others, without using physical strength, it is manifested by malicious gossip, jokes or non-directional aggressive behaviours (outbursts of anger, screaming, stamping)
- EMOTIONAL IRRITABILITY: tendencies to manifest negative feelings which are a reaction to the slightest provocation (harshness, grouchiness, boorishness).
- RESISTANCE: behaviour directed against the authority or power – objection and struggle with commonly accepted norms and customs.
- VERBAL AGGRESSION: expression of negative feelings through the form (screaming, shouting, arguing) and content of speech (threats, curses).

Methodological assumptions and sample description

The study was aimed to verify the hypothesis concerning the relationships between self-beliefs and beliefs about others (cognitive aspect, life scripts) and aggressiveness (aggressive behaviours and the expression of aggressive emotions) manifested in interpersonal relationships. It was assumed that attitudes to life (attachment styles) determine the behaviour in terms of relationships with other people, hence the following questions were put forward:

1. Which attitudes to life (self-beliefs and beliefs about others) are presented by secondary school students (positive vs. negative)?
2. In what way do (positive vs. negative) attitudes to life determine aggressiveness and its forms revealed in interpersonal relations?

Due to the fact that the research was of exploratory and diagnostic character, orientation of the hypotheses was abandoned, assuming only the general hypothesis on relationships between self-beliefs and beliefs about other people versus aggressiveness manifested in experienced emotions and behaviour in interpersonal relations.

A survey by questionnaire was conducted in the group of 151 students (girls – n=96; boys – n=55) of the first (n=51), second (n=50) and third (n=50) grades of secondary schools in Silesia (Katowice, Gliwice, Tarnowskie Góry). The participants' age ranged from 15 to 18 years (M=16.9; SD=0.79). The research used the following:

- Anna Sukiennik's *Questionnaire on Attitudes* (2012) used to assess the attitudes towards self and others. It consists of 73 items concerning beliefs and feelings about self and others evaluated in a 4-point Likert scale (from 1 – "I do not agree" to 4 – "I agree"). The items of the questionnaire form two subscales: I OK and YOU OK. The higher the score obtained in the particular subscale, the more positive the attitude towards self and others. The reliability measured by Cronbach's α method in the conducted research is as follows: I OK subscale $\alpha=0.872$; YOU OK subscale $\alpha=0.857$.
- The "Emotional Reactivity" *Questionnaire on Youth Aggressiveness*, designed by Urszula Sajewicz-Radtke, Bartosz M. Radtke and Dorota Kalka (2010) to examine the aggressiveness of junior high school students, but without the use of norms, was applied to measure the aggressiveness of secondary school students. The questionnaire consists of 60 items measured by means of a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 – "definitely not" to 5 – "definitely yes"). The higher the score achieved, the higher the level of aggressiveness is manifested. The tool measures the general aggressiveness and its dimensions. In the conducted research the reliability measured by α -Cronbach method is as follows: general aggression $\alpha=0.945$; direct aggression $\alpha=0.866$, indirect aggression $\alpha=0.835$, emotional irritability $\alpha=0.763$, resistance $\alpha=0.807$, verbal aggression $\alpha=0.866$. The questionnaire contains the scale of lie whose (α -Cronbach) reliability was $\alpha=0.427$ in the research.

Secondary school students' attitudes to life

The Questionnaire of Attitudes used in the research enables to specify the level of positive vs. negative attitude towards self (I OK) and others (YOU OK), which determines the level of trust towards self and others, self-esteem and valuing other people and the level of self and others' acceptance (Tables 1 and 2; Figure 1).

There is a clear tendency to a more positive self-perception (the ratio of high to low results – H:L = 1.71) than the perception of others (H:L=1.05). Therefore, two contradictory images appear, namely "I – more positive" and "You – more negative". It can be concluded that young people perceive themselves (I am OK) as trustworthy with high self-esteem more frequently, hence they are less likely to doubt themselves, their own strengths and capabilities. They feel confident in social situations more frequently, have a sense of being liked and accepted by others and also more frequently manifest assertive attitudes towards their expectations.

Table 1. The attitude towards self (I'm OK) in the surveyed group (N=151)

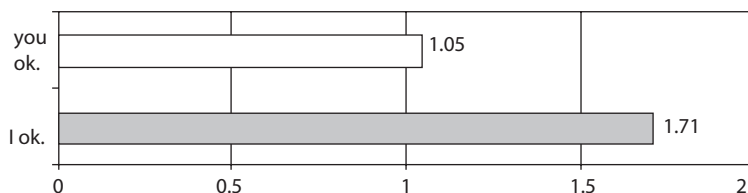
QUESTIONNAIRE ON ATTITUDES: I'm OK					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	LOW	17	11.3	11.3	11.3
	AVERAGE	104	68.9	69.3	80.7
	HIGH	29	19.2	19.3	100.0
	Total	150	99.3	100.0	
	No data	1	0.7		
	Total	151	100.0		
Ratio of high to low results (H: L)			1.71		

With regard to attitudes towards other people (You OK), the lack of placing trust in them is more frequently visible, perceiving them as egoistic, focused exclusively on their own needs and taking advantage of others. That can evoke the feeling that other people do not fulfill the needs of the individual and lead to one's carefulness and suspicion in relationships with others, or a tendency to withdraw and motivation to keep distance. The feeling of discomfort in dependency relations and fear of being hurt by others can occur more frequently.

Table 2. The attitude towards others (You're OK) in the surveyed group (N=151)

QUESTIONNAIRE ON ATTITUDES: You're OK					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	LOW	22	14.6	14.7	14.7
	AVERAGE	105	69.5	70.0	84.7
	HIGH	23	15.2	15.3	100.0
	Total	150	99.3	100.0	
	No data	1	0.7		
	Total	151	100.0		
Ratio of high to low results (H: L)			1.05		

The tendency to more positive self-perception and more negative perception of others is so distinct that it allows for assuming that this type of attitudes can lead to negative behaviours towards others. Such negative behaviours may be rationalised and legitimised by negative perception of others thereby constituting an adequate and defensive reaction to the expected (egoistic and exploiting) behaviours from others.

Fig. 1. Attitude to life – ratio of high to low results – H:L (N = 151)

Attitude to life and aggressiveness – domains of dependence

The differences indicated in attitudes to life provide a basis for analysing the connection with aggressive behaviours of the respondents. The Pearson correlation coefficient (Table 3) and additionally the Spearman rank correlation coefficient (Table 4) were used for the analysis of relationships between attitudes to life (attitude towards self and others) and aggressiveness and its dimensions.

Aggressiveness as a personality trait is mainly associated with attitudes towards others (You OK) in all its dimensions, with high statistical significance (0.01). Obviously, the negative correlation is the most noticeable between general aggressiveness and attitudes towards others ($r=-0.404$). This means that those who have a negative attitude towards other people at the same time tend to express it through different forms of aggression which are revealed in a variety of behaviours and emotions. In other words, those who obtain a high score on the scale of aggressiveness (manifesting behaviors aimed at harming and hurting others connected with expressing aggressive feelings) simultaneously obtain results showing a negative attitude to others. However, those obtaining low scores on the scale of aggressiveness, at the same time demonstrate a positive attitude to other people. That determines treating them as trustworthy, believing in their good intentions, feeling that they can be relied on. It also determines motivation to stay in and establish close, intimate relationships and a sense of comfort in dependency relations.

Interpreting this result, it is possible to formulate a thesis that the quality of beliefs about other people resulting from experience gained by dealing with them determines the way of behaviour towards them. Negative beliefs can activate defensive reactions in the form of expression of aggressive behaviours, modeled by the conviction that people deserve this kind of behaviour. At this point it is possible to refer to the just-world hypothesis according to which people should get what they deserve (“return good for good and evil for evil”), which exemplifies the law of retaliation. Therefore, the Christian principle of “brotherly love,” turning

the other cheek,” i.e. overcoming evil with good does not find application here. According to this principle, a human being should refrain from negative behaviours towards others, regardless of how others behave towards him/her (*“if someone throws a stone at you, throw a piece of bread at them”*).

However, in general, aggressiveness revealed in relations with others is not associated with the attitude towards self (I am OK). It can, therefore, be assumed that aggressiveness is not a form of compensation for the problems experienced in self-relation. Only emotional irritability is negatively correlated with the attitude towards self, which shows that self-dissatisfaction can lead to increased, generalised emotional arousal (reactivity), which translates into functioning in relations, i.e. people evaluating themselves negatively tend to exhibit negative feelings in response to the slightest provocation, as a generalised reaction to the experienced discomfort, resulting from the conviction of one’s own imperfection.

Table 3. Attitudes to life versus aggressiveness and its dimensions – the Pearson correlation coefficient (N=151)

Aggressiveness	Direct aggression	Indirect aggression	Emotional irritability	Resistance	Verbal aggression	Generalised aggression
Attitude to life						
I’m OK	0.037	- 0.042	-0.217**	-0.087	-0.070	-0.084
You’re OK	-0.321**	-0.354**	-0.289**	-0.378**	-0.325**	-0.404**

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

* Correlation significant at the 0.05 level two-tailed).

Referring to particular dimensions of aggressiveness and its connection with attitudes to life (towards self and others), they are negatively correlated. We could also risk a statement that there is some logic in it. The attitude towards others (You OK) is most strongly correlated with **resistance**, expressed in all behaviours against the authority or power, which are a manifestation of resistance to commonly accepted norms ($r=-0.378$). The conviction of “the evil of others” could therefore evoke the conviction about the necessity to overcome it, which is strictly cognitive. It means that cognitive schemata (image of others) define basic behaviours towards other people, i.e. negative convictions about others result in the disclosure of attitudes eliminating their potential evil. In some way these convictions must be expressed, which could lead to **indirect aggression** ($r=-0.354$) in the absence of assertive skills of their expression and lack of a constructive desire to reform the world. Such aggression manifests itself in behaviours intended to harm others, excluding the

use of physical strength (e.g. malicious gossiping or jokes), and non-directional aggressive behaviours (e.g. outbursts of anger expressed by screaming, stamping, banging one’s fist on the table). It is of strictly emotional nature, but results from the inability to directly express one’s own emotions. The excess of a certain level of intensity of emotions that are not controllable any more can trigger the appearance of **verbal aggression** ($r=-0.325$), i.e. the expression of negative feelings both in the form (screaming, shouting, arguing) and content of verbal statements (threats, curses). Further intensity of negative emotions that cannot be controlled but have to be “unloaded” in extreme situations could result in the appearance of **direct aggression** ($r=-0.321$) expressed in the use of physical strength directed against other person, or a group of people in order to hurt them. **Emotional irritability** is the least correlated with the attitude towards others ($r=-0.289$) revealed in tendencies to manifest negative feelings in response to provocation from others (harshness, grouchiness, boorishness). It is also a mechanism that may indirectly evoke aggressive behaviours arising from negative self-evaluation and not only from negative assessment of other people. Therefore, it is of extremely defensive nature, being a generalised emotional reaction to discomfort experienced in relationships with self and other people.

These relationships were confirmed, although more weakly, due to the measurement level (rank order, therefore less accurately) with the use of the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, which was conducted on the normalised results (Table 4). No significant correlation between attitudes towards self and emotional irritability was revealed here. However, since the Pearson correlation coefficient is a more accurate measurement, this correlation, even though it is weaker, was previously confirmed.

Table 4. Attitudes to life versus aggressiveness and its dimensions – the Spearman rank correlation coefficient (data normalised) (N=151)

Aggressiveness Life attitudes	Direct aggression	Indirect aggression	Emotional irritability	Resistance	Verbal aggression	General aggression
I’m OK	0.071	-0.029	-0.081	-0.039	0.049	0.067
You’re OK	-0.275**	-0.283**	-0.164*	-0.284**	-0.279**	-0.356**

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

* Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

It is also worth paying attention to one more aspect related to the feature of social approval (the lie scale), which is of extreme importance in diagnosing aggressiveness as it determines the tendency to give socially expected answers. Aggressiveness as a socially undesirable phenomenon is especially susceptible to the influence of the feature of social approval due to the fact that we reluctantly “admit” to behaviours socially considered to be negative. Analysis of the relationships between attitudes to life and the viable of social approval showed an interesting regularity, i.e. there was a more visible negative correlation between the attitude towards self (I OK) and the tendency to give socially expected answers (-0.233; correlation significant at the level of 0.01) and a weaker positive correlation between the attitude towards others (YOU OK) and the tendency to follow the viable of social approval (0.194; correlation significant at the level of 0.05). That means that the more positive self-beliefs are, the less guided we are by social expectations in self-evaluation (we are guided by internal standards of evaluation). And conversely, the negative self-evaluation is more dependent on external standards of evaluation. Different standards of evaluation are adopted in formulating beliefs about others (YOU OK). i.e. positive beliefs about others are more dependent on following social expectations, while negative beliefs about others result more frequently from the adoption of individual standards of evaluation. It means that the credibility of assessments depends on **whom we evaluate and in what way we evaluate the person**. We usually evaluate others positively and ourselves negatively “since it must be so”, according to the social standards, while conversely – we evaluate others negatively and ourselves positively “since that is what we really think and feel,” that is according to personal standards.

Summary and final conclusions

The obtained results enable to determine the specificity of functioning of young people in interpersonal relations, arising from their attitudes to life, which are the consequences of previous experiences. The transactional analysis, as a theoretical basis for the conducted analyses, explicitly indicates that cognitive scripts formed by one’s experiences in relations with others constitute the established attitudes determining personality, secondarily deciding on (positive vs. negative) behaviours towards others.

The regularity concerning a more positive self perception and tendency to the negative evaluation of others found in the research is an important cognitive mechanism determining the quality of interpersonal relationships (aggressive

behaviours, coercive actions). The regularity legitimises aggressive behaviours expressed towards those who are negatively evaluated, i.e. hypothetically “deserve” them. Aggressive behaviours take the form of “coercive actions”. James T. Tedeschi and Richard B. Felson (1994: 346–353) treat them as instrumental (functional) activities of various nature, but associated with making decisions about their use and the choice of action which is best in a given situation to reach the desired aim. The aggressor may follow three major aims and motives, i.e. controlling the behaviour of others, restoring justice, proving and protecting one’s own identity. This translates into attitudes to life related to the attitudes towards self and other people which are of defensive and instrumental character. Therefore, the aggressor makes a subjective evaluation of the value of the target/aim he/she tries to achieve, the probability of its achievement and failure in this regard and the potential negative consequences of his/her own actions. This assessment is possible on the basis of the previous experience gained in similar situations, while the decision to use the coercive strategy is triggered by script availability (its consolidation). Moreover, the decision about coercive action is also related to confronting it with the established system of values, which determines the possibility of its justification on the one hand and is associated with the protection of self-esteem on the other hand (behaviour against commonly accepted values poses a threat to self-esteem). The special importance of this concept lies in the analysis of aggressive behaviours in the context of other social behaviours related to the impact on others, as a result of the experience gained in contacts with people and attitudes towards life (attitudes towards “I” and “YOU”), which are their consequences. It is also the basis for the interpretation of the obtained results as it indicates potential cognitive mechanisms (self-perception and perception of others) as decisive in the choice of coercive versus non-coercive behaviours, depending on beliefs that rationalise them.

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