

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: THE MEDIATOR ROLE OF HOPELESSNESS LEVEL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Violence is increasing day by day. In order to prevent these actions, the reasons underlying the violence of a person against another person should be investigated. In this study, it is aimed to examine the mediating role of hopelessness in the relationship between the negative automatic thoughts that are known and the tendency of aggression.*

*Automatic Thoughts are accepted as the most superficial cognitive level affecting our emotions and behaviors. According to Aaron Beck's cognitive model, negative automatic thoughts occur as a result of the life events which are activating schemas that are formed in our childhood. There are many studies in the literature that relate negative automatic thoughts with emotional regulation. Studies on the relationship between negative automatic thoughts and level of hopelessness are also found in the literature.*

*The aggression tendency is one of the explanations about the reason for the aggression that is caused by the inability to control and suppress emotions. In this context, aggression can be considered as a result of emotional dysregulation. Considering the fact that negative automatic thoughts convey our emotions and behaviors without conscious judgment, a relationship between aggressive tendency and negative automatic thoughts is expected. Here, the effect of the hopelessness, which is known to be related to automatic thoughts, on this relationship will be discussed.*

*In this study, 'Negative Automatic Thoughts Scale', 'Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire' and, 'Beck Hopelessness Scale' were applied to university students.*

*A total of 112 participants were included in the study. The results of 19 participants were subtracted because of unanswered questions in the scales. The average age of the participants in the sample was 19.9. The participants consisted of Acibadem Mehmet Ali Aydınlar University undergraduate and associate degree students. 28% of respondents state that they are constantly thinking that there is a need of change. 29% of the respondents say that "Sometimes I feel like a bomb ready to explode".*

*It can be seen that there is a relationship between aggression and negative automatic thoughts. In this context, it is possible to focus on the effects of cognitive behavioral therapies on the aggressive tendency.*

**Keywords:** *Negative automatic thoughts, aggression, hopelessness*

Violence increases quantitatively day by day, moreover, it is getting more and more serious qualitatively. "Violence is defined as using of physical force or threat to an individual, a group or community resulting in injury, psychological harm, growth retardation or collapse, death and emotional, physical, verbal, sexual and political dimensions are encountered." (Ayan, 2007). Although both the government and non-governmental organizations carry out studies about increasing violence, violence continues to increase at a more frightening level.

According to the "Turkey Armed Violence Map" report which was published in 2018 by Umut Foundation, " There were 2,175 armed incidents reported to the press in 2015, while 3,679 incidents reported to the press in 2018." (Umut Foundation, 2019). In other words, armed incidents have increased by 69% in the past four years. Another data which shows the extent of the ascending violence incidents is the numbers of people who are victims of violence requesting protection decisions. In 2012, the Law No. 6284 on the protection of the family and the Prevention of violence against women entered into force. With the increase in violence against women, the condition of marital status has been abolished in order to make a protection order. There has been a 5-fold increase in protection orders from 2012 to 2018. As can be seen from here, the precautions taken against violence are still insufficient.

Then it is obvious that more systematic studies about increasing violence cases are needed. In order to prevent violence, it is necessary to evaluate the factors that can cause violence. Thus, understanding the origin of the problem can be made more robust prevention attempts.

Violence is a phenomenon that can occur as a result of many causes, and undoubtedly psychological factors are one of them. Understanding the psychological motivation that results in an individual displaying aggressive behavior will be highly effective in combating violence.

## **AGGRESSION**

Although violence and aggression tend to be independent concepts, they are essentially almost entirely dependent on each other. "Aggression is defined in the dictionary of psychologic terms as 'an individual's attempt to forcibly adopt his or her own thoughts or behaviors despite external resistance'" (Hasta, 2013). There are many explanations to the biopsychosocial dimension of aggression tendency. Each of these deals with the tendency of aggression from different perspectives. One of the earliest explanations for aggression tendency is that aggression is based on instinct. Freud and Lorenz were initiators of this view. According to Lorenz, aggression serves life, but Freud argued the opposite and stated that aggression serves death. Although these two scientists have basically explained the tendency of aggression by instinct, they have put forward opposite ideas about the function of aggression. (Sense Psychology, 2019). Freud describes aggression behavior as understanding that comes from the birth of human and animal nature, seeing it as the expression of an instinct of genetic origin. Accordingly, the individual's behavior is governed by two fundamental forces: the life instinct (eros) and the death instinct (thanotos) (Sense Psychology, 2019). Eros leads people to seek juvenility and fulfill their wishes, while thanotos leads them to self-destruction. Another important concept in Freud's psychoanalytic approach to aggression is "catharsis". "The expression of anger will lead to the reduction of the tension created by the energy accumulated in the individual, so anger is seen as a way to drain this accumulated energy. Expressing the accumulated energy will provide an emptiness (catharsis) and relief in the individual." (Özmen, 2006). According to this theory, aggression is an inevitable part of human nature and is beyond the control of the individual. Freud's explanation of aggression is one of the first statements on this subject, and it appears that he does not address man's control over his behavior and restricts

aggression to a single dimension. However, human behavior occurs as a result of many different elements.

Another explanation for the aggression tendency is the Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis. This model is essentially based on the psychoanalytic approach. (Özmen, 2006). According to this approach, “when an effort is made to reach any purpose is prevented, an anger emerges that induces hurting behavior” (Özmen, 2006). However, it is seen here that the individual's self-control is again ignored. According to the statements made by the Cognitive Behavioral School, the direct relationship between frustration and anger is not valid in all cases. According to the Cognitive Behavioral Approach, anger and aggression response may not occur when individuals understand that there is a reasonable reason for their disability (Özmen, 2006). Here, it is seen that people are referring to their control over their behavior.

Social Learning Theory explains the effects of environmental factors in explaining aggression. From an early age, children record what is happening around them like a video recorder and thus have certain behavioral patterns. Even though behaviors such as crying and anger appear to be normal in younger children, they are expected to learn how to control their aggression tendencies in the future ”(Güler, 2010). Bandura and colleagues argued that what caused the aggression was dependent on external factors rather than an internal force (Eroğlu, 2009). What makes the social learning approach unique is that it sees aggression as a changeable and preventable phenomenon (Eroğlu, 2009). In other words, this theory implies that one may have self-control over his or her own behavior, which means that the tendency of aggression resulting in violent acts is manipulative.

The approaches of the cognitive behavioral school related to aggression tendency are also very valuable. According to this approach, what is essential is not an event but the way that it is perceived. Our reactions to the events are about how we interpret them. “The nervous system is stimulated in all emotional states, but clues about how an individual reacts are determined by the circumstances of the individual, in other words by the environment” (Özmen, 2006). According to the Cognitive Behavioral School, anger is a result of the interaction of cognition and behavior. (Turk, Hamamcı 2016). In this context, it is necessary to evaluate why people make negative references to events and react with anger.

The core beliefs gained by the experiences of people in early childhood are permanent and quite profound because they are mostly not expressed. These core beliefs are absolute truths that do not change for individuals. (Beck, 2011). “Core beliefs are the most important beliefs; it is broad, rigid and overgeneralized. (Beck, 2011)

### **COGNITIVE MODEL**

Many people experience similar events in everyday life, but the response to similar events is quite varied. This means that the reactions to an event are quite individual. According to the cognitive model, a person's situation does not directly determine what he or she feels or does; emotional reactions are shaped by the perception of the situation. (Beck, 2011).

One of the most important concepts of cognitive model is automatic thoughts. “Automatic thoughts are defined as repetitive, positive or negative automatic self-expressions that people say to themselves in certain situations (Yavuzer & Karatas, 2012). When these thoughts do not occur as a result of a conscious effort, people may not be aware of these thoughts, but they develop a reaction as a result of these thoughts. Beck stated that many disease occurred as a result of negative thoughts about oneself, the environment, and the future (Cognitive triad). Negative automatic thoughts are:

- They occur suddenly like reflexes.
- They do not follow a certain logical sequence, such as problem solving or goal-oriented thinking.
- They continue to form even though they do not suit objective reality (Şirin & Izgar, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *1. Participants*

This study was conducted with undergraduate and associate degree students studying at Acıbadem Mehmet Ali Aydınlar University. A total of 112 students participated in the study but the data of 22 participants were excluded from the scope of the study due to incomplete or incorrect filling of the scales given.

### *2. Measures*

In this study, three different scales were used to evaluate the mediating role of hopelessness in the relationship between negative automatic thoughts and aggression tendency. Scales were Automatic Thoughts Scale, Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire and Beck Hopelessness Scale.

Automatic Thoughts Scale is a 5-point Likert scale consisting of 30 questions based on self-assessment technique. It shows that as the score of the participants increases, the negative automatic thoughts intensify.

Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire consists of a total of 34 items based on the self-assessment technique and this scale is a 5-point Likert-scale type. This scale consists of five sub-factors: “physical aggression”, “verbal aggression”, “anger”, “hostility” and “indirect aggression (Çelik & Otrar, 2009), but these sub-factors were not considered in this study.

On the Beck Hopelessness Scale, there are 20 items in total and participants are expected to respond yes or no. Each answer that is compatible with the given key is 1 point and the answers that do not comply do not get points. The total score obtained is considered as hopelessness point” (Durak & Palabıyıkoglu, 2006).

Socio-demographic information form was used together with the mentioned scales. The instructions of all scales were given to the participants by the researcher. Informed consent forms were also signed to the participants.

## **RESULTS**

85.6% of the participants are women and 14.4% are men. The majority of the participants (35.6%) were 20 years old, 20% were 20 years old, 18.9% were 19 years old, 17.8% were 18 years old.

Regression analysis was used to investigate the mediating role of hopelessness in the effect of negative Automatic Thought on Aggression.

The correlation between negative automatic thoughts and hopelessness level is 0.554. Negative automatic thoughts on the other hand, the correlation between aggression tendency is 0.330. Finally, the correlation between aggression tendency and hopelessness level is 0.305.

The effects of the variables on each other were examined by regression analysis. Firstly, the effect of the independent variable, Negative Automatic Thought, on the dependent variable Aggression Tendency was calculated and it was seen that it had an effect with a negative coefficient of 0.330 beta at 95% significance level.

Afterwards, the effect of hopelessness, which is the mediator variable, on the aggression tendency was examined and it was found that the level of despair at the 95% significance level had an effect on the aggression tendency with 0.003 beta coefficient.

After the effects of the independent variable and the mediator variable on the dependent variable were examined separately, the mediation level was also examined by regression analysis. To be able to talk about full mediation here, the beta coefficient at a significance level of 95% had to be above 0.05. As a result of the analysis of 95% significance level .056 beta coefficient negative thoughts on the tendency of aggression was found to have a full mediating role.

## **DISCUSSION**

Studies on the origin of the problem are critical to prevent increased violence. In other words, it is very important to determine the factors that motivate an individual against any other living creature in any aggressive behavior pattern. (Haskan&Yıldırım, 2012).

In this study, negative automatic thoughts that may have an effect on aggression tendency are discussed. The relationship between depression and negative automatic thoughts, which is one of the basic concepts of Beck's Cognitive Model, is known. The effect of negative automatic thoughts on aggression was investigated with the thought that it occurs as a result of emotion dysregulation just like depression.

In literature, it is stated that there is a relationship between depression and hopelessness. (Cam Çelikel&Erkorkmaz, 2008; Dilbaz&Seber, 1993). There are also studies suggesting a relationship between negative automatic thoughts and hopelessness in the literature.(Çakar, 2014; However, this study was designed considering that emotional tendency to aggression is cognitive behavioral approach and it is related to perception of events.

Although the results of the analysis showed that hopelessness has a mediating role in the effect of negative automatic thoughts on the aggression tendency, the fact that the beta coefficient was liminal necessitated the repetition of the study with a larger sample. However, the gender distribution in the sample is not heterogeneous enough and may be one of the limitations of this study because the effect of the gender factor on the results of the study cannot be eliminated.

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