

## Normalisation of Violence among Adolescents

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### Abstract

The present study explored adolescent life in a violent context with the objective to explore the prevalence of violence and the normalising effect it had in the development of adolescents exposed to violence. The field site for the study was an area in the northern part of the city of Chennai known as a site with a high prevalence of violence. Case study method was used to study the lives of six adolescents identified with the help of an organisation working in the area for the past eight years. Findings of the study revealed that the adolescents in the community had a high exposure to violence at school, home and the community. The degree of exposure and involvement with violence varied with age and gender for the adolescents in the community. Severity of violence was evident with the involvement of the local police in regulating adolescent violence on a regular basis. Violence is normalised in this context as it is not considered an atypical action, rather it is perceived as an immediate way of resolving problems. The study found that violence has been normalised as a result of immediate and systemic factors at play within the community. Education in its broadest forms, plays the role of a deterrent to the violent influences in the community.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, violent contexts, normalization, community

### Introduction to the study

Adolescence is widely recognised as a social and cultural construct by researchers around the world. It has generally been agreed upon that universal definitions of adolescence should, at best, be restricted to describing adolescence as a 'period of transition', in which 'although no longer considered a child, the young person is not yet considered an adult' (McCauley et al, 1995).

Adolescence is a time of exploration and expansion of one's world. G Stanley Hall (1904) famously termed this phase as one of 'storm and stress'. This phrase is equally true of vulnerabilities and exposure to violence. The exposure to violence can be destructive to self as well as others. Adolescents are in many cases perpetrators, victims in others, and often bystanders and witnesses to violence. (Hagan & Foster, 2001). Violence leads to depression and a premature exit from adolescence and entry into adulthood.

This study was undertaken to study the relationship and response of adolescents to exposure to violence. It was part of a larger research project which sought to explore 'adolescence in a violent context' as well as adolescent morality and impact of popular

culture in the context of violence. The objective that is addressed in this paper focuses primarily on adolescents' exposure to violence and its normalisation for adolescents living in violent settings.

### *Understanding violence in the context of the study*

One of the simplest definitions of violence has been, "the use of physical force in such a way that it produces injury or death" (Fraser, 1996). Rivara (2002) defines it as 'the unjust or abusive exercise of power'. Non-physical forms such as threatening, stalking, harassment are also examples of violence. (Munni & Malhi, 2006). Violence has been categorised into two types- reactive and proactive. 'Reactive violence' is when a child employs violence as a means of self-defence while 'Proactive violence' is the non-defensive use of force and creates alienation from peers (Fraser, 1996). Both these types of violence were found to be relevant in the context of this study. Isolation denies the child social learning opportunities which causes further alienation as well as deprivation of skills and tools that would help manage the aggression. Failure at school as well as entry into sub and counter cultures, which are often illegitimate, encourage the use of violence by the adolescent.

Munni and Malhi (2006) point out that in adolescent health care, risk taking behaviour such as the consumption of alcohol, use of cigarettes and the use of drugs are closely connected with use of violence. Parents who fail to set limits, who use harsh punishments, who fail to reward prosocial behaviour and finally use a coercive style of parenting, all unintentionally, encourage the child to develop aggression to achieve social goals. (Fraser, 1996)

### Research Design

The research design adopted for this study was the 'Case Study' method. The location of North Chennai with its evident context of violence made this a 'revelatory case' as it had the potential to shed light on the research questions of this study. (Mathews&Ross, 2010). The northern part of the city of Chennai was once the site of the 'washermen'. Post-independence, the location was largely ignored in terms of development, as people struggled to find new ways of livelihood. Over the last few decades, the population in the region has increased considerably with many migrants coming to the city in search of blue collar jobs. Law and order has evolved differently in this part of the city that is known today for its violence with dominant gangs rising to the fore luring adolescent boys into violence with promises of wealth and status. The case study was a micro level study and predominantly qualitative in nature. The researcher approached the community through a small organization that runs a Centre that has been working with the adolescents in the region for the past eight years. The adolescents in the community attend the nearby government school.

### Participants and Sampling

In this study, six adolescents studying in grade 10 (3M + 3F), between the ages of 14-16 years were individually interviewed over the course of six weeks. Two parents of the six student participants, were interviewed to understand their exposure and approach to violence. Three members of the organisation were interviewed at different stages of the research to provide guidance to the study as well as to corroborate responses of other participants. All participants were recruited using convenience sampling keeping in mind their daily routines as well as the sensitivity of the research topic. Identity of all the participants in the study has been kept

confidential. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board at Azim Premji University and all ethical considerations were fulfilled throughout the course of the study.

### Findings and Discussion

#### *Exposure to violence*

The presence of violence and regular exposure to the same in the community was acknowledged by the different participants of the study with variations across age and gender. Violence for the adolescent age group was categorised into four types by the organisation's founder. The first category is the 'student on student' violence which has in the past escalated to involvement of the local police. "O3: *A student removed a fan during class. It resulted in a gang fight and it became so that they went to hit the teacher herself.....*" The second category is the violence by 'community members and teachers on students'. Students who engage in violence are ostracised and teachers make examples of such students by using extreme violence (corporal punishment) on them. The third category is the violence by 'family members on the students' which is a regular occurrence in the community with parents using hot iron, sticks, belts, slippers etc. as tools of violence. The final category is the violence 'between community members' and includes forms of gang violence. O3: *"They cut someone's leg on the main road near Kasimedu. I was in the share auto."*

#### *Normalisation of violence.*

The high exposure to violence validated by participant responses shows normalisation of violence for adolescents in this community. Normalisation in this context is understood as becoming the norm/normal condition with its accepted forms of violent attitudes and actions. Violence for adolescents in this context has become an accepted way of life and often the justified attitude and action. This normalisation is a gradual process and is distinct across age and gender. Participant responses attested that female violence was typically verbal in nature while in the case of male violence, physical forms were exhibited. Similarly, violence in the case of younger children was seen as a non-issue and did not require external intervention whereas with an increase in age, violence became more prominent in use and form and necessitated external intervention. "S5: *Yes it increases. My*

age students using tobacco items has become a trend. They then beat up others to prove their status or show off.”

Students viewed violence as inclusive of both verbal and physical forms, with the former often leading to the latter. Tools of violence were in most cases gathered from the immediate environment. An example is the use of broken-down school furniture as weapons by students.

Violence is manifested in patriarchal and gender differences and seems to have a sense of continuity at home- school and community, and hence tends to be normalized. Systemic issues like the scramble for resources, domestic violence and the use of alcohol leads to prevalent use of violence. “S1: Since the houses are very close to each other, people are used to the noises and are affected by it.” Violence is viewed as a legitimate means to “finish off” anger according to one student’s response, while most agree that it is used to win arguments.

Perhaps the strongest support for normalisation of violence comes from the legitimisation of violence by students and organisation members. Most students agree that violence is a part of their life. They have been witness to violence from a young age and have been taught both explicitly and implicitly that ‘violence is the way to show you are right’. Violence was justified by the students, provided it was necessitated by a legitimate reason. “S3: ..... It is okay when police use violence to stop a fight, but it should not cause injury.” Parents too admitted to using physical violence in disciplining their children and using it as a form of punishment and sometimes to take out their frustrations.

Analysing the findings, one can see that the use of violence leads to rejection by others and to further use of violence. This cycle of violence

was detailed by Fraser (1996) who argued that such isolation would deny the children essential learning opportunities that would provide them with skills and tools to manage the aggression. From the literature reviewed for this study, one can draw on the phenomena of ‘escape conditioning’ where children use aggression to escape punishment and, in this context adolescents using violence towards older persons such as parents and school teachers serves as an example of the same. Student responses justified the use of violence as a reactive action. It is of interest to note that while verbal and non-physical forms of violence are most prevalent, much of it is limited to staging and physical violence is relatively limited. Parental use of violence as a form of discipline also legitimises the use of violence for children.

### Reflections

There were several limitations to this study, some of which were beyond the control of the researcher. The number of participants was determined by the availability of time and willingness on the part of the participants. The interviews with the students and their parents also faced the limitations of language, especially of cultural references (limited familiarity of researcher with Tamil), as the essence of certain questions and responses may have been lost in translation.

A context which has normalised violence makes an outsider feel out of place during the first few visits. The newcomer is forced to either adopt the same language of violence or risk ostracism from the community. The language of violence dominates all others in such a setting. Educational and other forms of intervention face an uphill task in distancing violence and introducing a new normal for adolescents in such violent contexts.

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