Two Preadolescents' Perceptions of Developmental Issues in a Deconstructing Society

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Abstract: Most literature on youth focuses on prominent issues of bullying/cyber abuse, dating and relationship issues, and mental health concerns for children and adolescents; however, specific to preadolescence, little is written in comparison due to the implication that the transition between the two life stages are well blended. However, the question becomes whether the recommendations from researchers to target presadolescents for youth aggression interventions are delivered effectively to this population. Thus, the focus of this research is to ascertain the perspectives of developmental issues of self-concept, relationships, bullying, and safety from preadolescents. Some of the responses from two preadolescent females concurred with literature; however, responses were nonexistant or scant regarding interactive or existential learning through family, school, church, and community. Although this research is limited to only two presadolescent females, the developmental perspectives reflect societal degeneration as experienced in a rural Midwest town attending school lockdowns with casualties and residing within close proximity to registered sex offenders.

Keywords: youth development, violence, relationships, bullying

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Introduction

Current literature on adolescents primarily focused on increasing youth aggression amid a violent environment inclusive of students' weekly physical altercations and bullying, criminal activity in school neighborhoods, student-teacher altercations (Juvonen, 2001), and increasing school shootings with casualties (Wang et al., 2020). Bullying and cyberbullying continued to be a prominent safety issue in regards to non-heterosexual relationships as well as results from the 2021 National School Climate Survey found that 83.1% of LGBTQ+ students reported harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, actual or perceived race and ethnicity, and actual or perceived disability (Kosciw et al., 2022).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020, April 7), teens reported dating abuse more often than any other age group with homicide identified as the 3rd leading cause of death for youth. Within the context of heterosexual relationships, persistent trends revealed both genders engaged in the roles of perpetrator

as well as victim equally (Close, 2005; Herman, 2009). Ackard et al. (2007) found that youth perpetrated and experienced violence differently. For example, young males responded to their partners with more severe physical violence and suffered fewer psychological consequences than young females who perpetrated with less intense forms of physical violence but suffered more profound psychological consequences. However, differences in cyberbullying's perpetrator/victim roles based on sexual orientation revealed 21% of LGBTQ+ students admitted to cyberbullying others as compared to 8% of heterosexual students (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). On the other hand, a study by Burgess-Proctor et al. (2008) on adolescent girls' response to cyber abuse, revealed that 27% had responded by cyberbullying back, 36% reported that they did not inform anyone, and 25% reported that they did nothing at all. These findings implied that the girls' reactions may be indicative of cognitive restructuring of the abuse in defining the perpetrators' character as "pathetic," (this type of response may be the suggested action from school anti-bullying intervention programs). Additionally, the girls may not have been affected by the cyber abuse, were perpetrators themselves, or were desensitized to abuse and/or believed bullying and cyber abuse were the norm.

The hostile environment on school grounds created situations of victims relying on the school personnel and peers as rescuers. In regards to reporting bullying on school grounds, 61.5% of LGBTQ+ students did not report the incident to school staff because they did not believe school staff would do anything about the harassment. This may be based on the fact that 60.3% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response or told the student to ignore it (Kosciw et al., 2022). As a potential result, 32.2% of LGBTQ+ students reported absence at least one entire school day and 11.3% missed four or more days in a month due to safety issues.

Young adolescent females who have experienced dating violence also have developed other at-risk behaviors as well as the comorbidity of mental health issues (Silverman et al., 2001). By contrast, adolescent male victims of dating abuse seldom seemed to fear violence by their female partners, often describing the attacks as amusing (Molidor & Tolman, 1998) and flirtatious. Researchers have documented a trend that teenagers, who have lower self-esteem, were more likely to show addictive behaviors involving cell phone and social media usage (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005), score significantly higher on depression and anxiety assessments (Gellene, 2006, May 24), as well as have stalking patterns as exhibited by both genders (Shariff, 2008; Smith-Darden et al., 2016). Rothman et al. (2021) found that 48% of teenagers who have reported being stalked or harassed from a relationship proposed that adolescents may not recognize inappropriate relationship boundaries nor may not have known effective and safe methods to confront someone's overwhelming or covertly threatening attention. Stalking would become a more pertinent safety issue as students believed they were in a potentially hostile environment and would not be protected by school officials and/or parents. In addition to the school environment, neighborhoods may harbor adult sex offenders as 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys as sexually assaulted traveling to and from school by an adult perpetrator according to the Register Sex Offenders Registry (n.d.). Thus, factors of safety issues impacting youth steadily inclined in peer victimization, school shootings, and suicides ranging from elementary schools to college campuses as indicative of the pervasiveness or desensitization of violence and a lack of safety intervention as a social norm.

Although some school communities have provided anti-bullying programs and interventions (Close, 2005; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008a) as well as offered curriculum on dating violence prevention (Cissner & Ayoub, 2014), professionals have advocated that interventions for adolescence and teenagers would be more effectively served by reaching the youth at the earlier age of preadolescence (Close, 2005; Shariff, 2008). For example, it was reported that more than 20% of high school students have had their first sexual intercourse prior to age 14, i.e., during preadolescence (Escobar-Chaves & Anderson, 2008), and earlier sexual encounters have demonstrated the requirement for interventions in middle schools (Foshee et al., 2001). Collins and Van Dulmen (2006) and Cutter-Wilson & Richmond (2011) warned that relationship violence which began in adolescence has been shown to continue into adulthood, and therefore, Arsenault (2001) recommended that educators and counselors evaluate their students as early as age six to remediate any developmental factors which might hinder later personal growth and academic achievement. Also, Linder and Collins (2005) warned that research findings indicated that preadolescence or middle childhood behavior predicted more strongly towards early adulthood dating violence than adolescent behavior.

Purpose and Rationale

In examining preadolescent literature, the majority of topics emphasized developmental issues of self-esteem, physiological changes which accompanied puberty, and parenting preteens (Huston & Ripke, 2006), and seemed more appropriate for optimal interactions between the child and the environment for learning and development per Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bonfenbrenner Center for Translational Research, n.d.). However, with the current state of youth aggression, the interactions may be stifled resulting in isolation, withdrawal, and inhibited communication and connections to others. Therefore, to ascertain whether the at-risk interventions and programs originally designated for older youth were reaching the mindset of preadolescents as allegedly administered by parents, school, and community personnel, it was this author's intention to inquire how preadolescents would perceive these issues in context of their environment. Specifically, this author surveyed two preadolescent females in regards to the issues of self-concept, relationships, bullying, and personal safety.

Methodology

Participants

The two preadolescents in this study were Caucasian females who were students in different grades at the same public middle school, who participated in extracurricular activities, church, and community functions, and who were from lower-middle socioeconomic nontraditional families. Both were clean in appearance, very thin in stature, reported no substance use, and used media two hours daily, i.e., cell phones, computer, video games, and cable/dish television monitored by parental control. Both resided within close proximity to a registered sex offender in a small Midwest town inhabited by 85 registered sex offenders (National Sex Offender Registry, n.d.).

Procedure

Prior to the study, the author developed a series of questions pertaining to four categories of self-concept, relationships, bullying, and personal safety. Among a group of youth, two females volunteered to participate and parental consent was received. The author met with both subjects simultaneously, and had instructed them that they would be given a tablet which contained a series of generic questions related to self-concept, relationships, bullying, and personal safety. The author instructed the subjects to think about their answers as long as they needed, to write their answers to the questions in a covered tablet used to maintain privacy, and to leave questions unanswered if they felt uncomfortable with the question. The subjects were not cued to answer the questions in any way as a measure to discourage biased comments. In addition, the author did not read the preadolescents' comments until after the conclusion of the study. The duration of the research was approximately one hour over two consecutive days.

The following text includes the author's questions and the subjects' answers as well as a summary of responses and supplements from the literature as reflective of the four categories of self-concept, relationships, bullying, and personal safety:1. Self-Concept: Preadolescents form identities and measured their worth based on interpretations of others' evaluations, and thus, the successful adult life was defined as having a college education, a good job, and healthy relationships (Huston & Ripke, 2006). Therefore, based on the literature of preadolescence and self-concept, the author composed generic questions for this survey. In regards to developmental tasks of preadolescence, the author was interested in the participants' perceptions of: 1) sense of identity as defined by their accomplishments, 2) the ability to set goals, 3) sense of their world, and 4) the influence of friends, family, school, church, and community upon their self-identity.

Self-Concept Questions and Participants' Responses:

Both subjects portrayed having a sense of self as revealed in their values, interests, and in what they do well; this concurred with the literature. In regards to identifying the "best" about their selves and world, both subjects identified friends as a valuable asset in their lives, and identified themselves overall in optimistic terms as well. In regards to identifying what they didn't like about their self and their world, one subject answered in regards body image and world issues while the other subject's responses referred to being frequently teased and familial issues. In regards to self-responsibility for their lives, a sense of awareness and self-empowerment was evident in their responses as well as coping skills of cognitive reconstructing such as "making my times fun so I can remember them easier." In regards to future aspirations, both preadolescents identified the necessity of college and jobs which concurred with the literature; however, one preadolescent identified long-term goals to reach her proposed outcome while the other preadolescent identified more short-term goals.

It is interesting to note that questions asking, "What have you learned about how to live a better life from friends, church, community, and worldly events," were omitted by both participants. In addition, questions asking, "What have you learned about how to live a better life from family, school, and the best of worldly

events," were omitted by one participant. In regards to the unanswered questions, perhaps, the questions reflected that the two preadolescents were not aware of reciprocated learning opportunities from their friends, school, church, and the community, or there may have been a negative connotation with these specific areas which did not comply with the values of building "fun times" or self "power", and therefore, were selectively dismissed. However, in regards to self-concept, both preadolescents identified having friends as one of the "best" features of their self/world which is consistent with development transitions in the literature.

2. Relationships: Research supported friendships as an important part of self-identity and influences psychological growth (Wierkle & Avgoustis, 2003). For example, preadolescents who have committed friendships show better academic performances, enjoy school, and participate more in school (Huston & Ripke, 2006). Richard and Schneider's (2005) study revealed preadolescents females were more determined in their friendship development to produce prosocial and less conflictual relationships, and thus, were preferred by their peers as play-work companions. Contrarily, Troop-Gordon and Ladd's (2005) research on peer relationships found that although children's self-appraisals became increasingly positive during preadolescence, their appraisals of peers became more negative. Because peer-to-peer relationship norms peaked around age 12, preadolescents were especially susceptible to both prosocial and antisocial contagion group norms.

Preadolescents spend significant amounts of time in mixed gender groups that may initiate romantic interests (Connolly et al., 2004). Sorensen (2007, July) warned that youth lacked the maturity and awareness to know healthy dating behavior. As a result, youth are likely to misinterpret and tolerate dysfunctional relationships. For example, an act of jealousy or constant text messaging could be misinterpreted as a sign of love. Preadolescents and adolescents often misinterpreted "love" as submission or domination relative to what they have seen in their own families or what they have learned from more experienced peers (Close, 2005). Although Sorensen (2007, July) reported that middle childhood peer relationships usually lasted only a few weeks or months, Huston and Ripke (2006) stressed that these relationships significantly predicted behavioral patterns in adult romantic relationships.

In regards to dating advice, preadolescents and adolescents preferred consulting a friend or the media. Due to watching soap opera-type programs, adolescents learned that it was appropriate and expected to date at a younger age than their maturity age, and that dating many partners reflected higher social status with their peers. According to the 2003 Middle School Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, 6% of sixth graders and 9% of eighth graders have had sexual intercourse (Escobar-Chaves & Anderson, 2008; Whalen et al., 2006;). In addition to learning about dating roles from the media, Albert et al. (2003) found naive acceptance of sexual coercion among youth ages 12-14 with 34% of males' beliefs that it was acceptable to pressure a female to have sex when it had been rumored that the female had already engaged in prior sexual behaviors. It was clear from the literature that youth engaged in sexual risk-taking behaviors before they were developmentally mature to cope with potential outcomes. Learning about sexual risk-taking behaviors seemed to be indicative of media's influence as well as the youths' own interactions and experiences with peers and their home environment. In addition, there seemed to be a high probability that youth cannot distinguish between love and friendship. In

regards to questions on relationships, the author was interested in the preadolescents' perceptions of: 1) the definitions of "friend" and "love," 2) the influence of the media, and 3) the influence of friends, family, school, church, and community upon the subjects' perceptions of relationships.

Relationship Questions and Participants' Responses:

Both subjects' definitions of friendship included elements of shared commonalities, loyalty, and trust. Both subjects differentiated "love" from "friendship" by suggesting a bond connection. These responses did not necessarily concur with the literature since the preadolescents were not dating; therefore, the context for defining "love" and "friendship" may be different. Television seemed to be a neutral influence on their learning about relationships, but dating behaviors modeled by adult couples seemed to have been vicarious learned. Answers were more detailed in responding to generic questions while other sources of learning through family, church, and community were minimal or nonexistent. In regards to learning about relationships from friends, family, school, and the church, one subject recited conservative norms such as "choose carefully," while the other subject critiqued her peers' fickle dating behaviors. This critique could be reflective of disapproval from the apparent lack of loyalty expected of friendships and peers who like each other. Thus, the preadolescents viewed friendships in optimistic terms which concur with the literature.

It is interesting to note that the question asking, "What have you learned about relationships from your community, and worldly events," were omitted by both participants. In regards to the unanswered questions, perhaps similar to the section on self-concept, the question reflected that the two preadolescents were not aware of reciprocated learning opportunities from their community, or there may have been a negative connotation with this specific area which did not comply with their values.

3. Bullying. Research indicated that numerous youth have either been bullied or have witnessed bullying among peers. Hinduja and Patchin (2008b) reported that as many as 8% of victims reported that the consequences of bullying left them feeling angry, vengeful, afraid, with an aftermath of suicidal ideations, depression, anxiety, urges toward school refusal and to run away. As noted earlier, the National Crime Prevention Council reported that children who were themselves victimized could also perpetrate violence (Li, 2005; Strom & Strom, 2005). Hinduja and Patchin's (2008a) study reported that 12% of the adolescents felt threatened and 5% feared for their safety. However, most youth were reluctant to report cyber abuse due to fears that parents would remove their internet access, and thus, immobilize youth to social isolation by prohibiting immediate access to their friends (Cottle, 2001). Adolescents could become confused about their difficult situation, and not have the trust to seek help. As with dating violence, many adolescents withheld information for fear of being judged as immature, wrong, or not normal (Vernberg et al., 1999), especially when doing so manifested further revictimization by the perpetrator. Li's (2005) study revealed that the majority of the students who were cyber-bullied or bystanders chose to be quiet rather than to inform adults, and reported that students believed school personnel have not tried to stop cyber abuse even when officials were aware of it. Another variable was the exposure to violence in real life and in various media which could desensitize youth to the point of their acceptance of victimization as a

reality of life. Thus, survey questions on bullying were based on these issues as well as how preadolescents perceived the influence of friends, family, school, church, and community upon the subjects' perception of bullying.

Bullying Questions and Participants' Responses:

Consistent with the literature, both participants have been physically and psychologically bullied and cyber abused on an intermittent and frequent schedule. They have witnessed numerous incidences of abuse at their school. Both participants did not know why they were bullied but assumed it was because of their small stature and for the abuser's amusement. They believed peers bullied because they lacked friends, had problems, and projected their troubles upon others so they would feel powerful. This abuse existed in the participants' world because bullies weren't reported; the threat of retaliation was real, and the lack of the school's willingness to stop or have effectively enforced anti-bullying policies reinforce violence. One subject still believed in the importance of telling someone while the other subject's experience reinforced mistrust of school personnel. However, she advocated for more direct involvement by school authorities to stop bullying by showing videos of the harmful and hurtful consequences suffered by the victims; this statement concurred with the literature that abusers lack compassion due to possible avoidance of the duress they cause others. As suggested by Pellegrini and Bartini (2000), a pervasiveness of bullying in schools may reveal a lack of effective and enforced anti-bullying policy.

Although the subjects felt hurt and powerless as victims, they have also replicated the bullying behavior upon others; this reciprocal nature was consistent with the literature. There was a sense of desensitization due to the frequent cyber abuse and bullying in schools as evident in their report that they don't worry about the abuse because it was "who we were," indicative of abuse as an accepted part of their life. Unfortunately, a school lockdown due to violence and peer casualties may have reinforced the reality of living with violence for these preadolescents.

4. Personal Safety. In this country, when youth feel threatened, children have learned the response of "Don't talk to strangers," and "Stranger Danger," preadolescents have learned, "Walk/run away," while teens have learned, "Be safe, not sorry." Although this may be the current intervention to feeling threatened, Kremar and Curtis (2003) reported on the influence of violent cartoon media upon children's moral development, and found that children who watched a video of cartoon characters who argued and engaged in violent behavior or watched a similar clip except the characters argued and walked away tended to judge violence as morally acceptable behavior regardless of which video they had watched. This outcome suggested that children may not have understood the discrepancies between solving arguments by walking away and solving arguments with violence. The results may have also suggested that children were desensitized to violence due the prevalence on television content and computer games, and therefore, chose to engage in more primitive criminal behavior as acceptable responses. One ponders how well these lessons have been learned when our society has included the protective safeguards of Amber Alert, websites, and newscasts devoted to alerting society to criminal activity.

Smith and Wilson (2002) examined the influenced of violence from media exposure to children and found that compared to other youth, children under the age of eight were more likely to be anxious when they were exposed to news with graphic and intense visual images such as natural disasters and accidents. Female preadolescents were more likely to be upset and anxious by stories involving crime and violence inclusive of personal injury and kidnapping (Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2008) reported that 40% of juvenile kidnappings were perpetrated by a family member, 27% by an acquaintance, and 24% by a stranger, and sadly, resulted in children who were kept or murdered. Such horrific reports would not only manifest anxiety in preadolescents, but in older adolescents and adults as well.

In addition to the victimization of cyber abuse, and media violence, Shariff (2008) reported that psychological bullying was just as prevalent and intended to isolate, stalk, and ostracize the victim. This was similar to the psychology of stalking which is a form of psychological trauma resulting in potential physical harm. Among the behaviors of a stalker, the psychology of a stalker has been defined as someone who denigrated the victim to an object in order to eliminate empathy or guilt. Stalkers would slander or defame the character of their victim which isolated the victim and give the stalker more control or a feeling of power (Law Encyclopedia, n.d.). Although significant attention has been devoted to adult perpetrators and victims of stalking, there was persuasive evidence that stalking began at a much younger age (McCann, 2001). Stalking was found in obsessional harassment such as bullying, sexual harassment, and dating violence. Burgess-Proctor et al. (2008) reported adolescent females sensed they were being stalked by an ex-boyfriend or a stranger, and one in five females did not know the identity of their cyber abuser. Research on child abusers revealed adult child predators would select their victims from schoolyards, church, community gatherings, single-parent households, as well as the internet and would stalk and lure their victims by acting friendly, smiling, and asking for help. Generally, the target of the sex offender's fantasy would typically be a child or preadolescent less than 12 years old (Gado, 2008, September 7). Thus, issues of dating violence, bullying, cyber abuse, and personal safety all are systemic to the home, school, and community norms of expected and permitted behaviors.

The survey questions regarding personal safety was based on the literature. Inclusive to the generic questions, the author selected four photographs to ascertain which adult was perceived as more trustworthy. Since both preadolescents were Caucasian, all photographs were of Caucasians males and females. The photos are described as follows:

- Photograph 1 was an older middle-aged male, Caucasian, short white hair, broad smile, wearing a casual shirt [a medical doctor].
- Photograph 2 was a young adult female, Caucasian, short brown hair, gentle smile, wearing a shirt [a high school student].
- Photograph 3 was a young adult female, Caucasian, short red hair, broad smile, head bent sideways, wearing summer attire, petting a dog beside her [a college student].
- Photograph 4 was a middle-aged male, Caucasian, short brown hair, blue dress shirt and tie, demonstrating attending behaviors [a professional counselor].

Personal Safety Questions and Participants' Responses:

The only input this section of the survey can offer was the participants' perceptions regarding the appearance of trustworthiness among four photographs of Caucasians. The subjects selected Photographs #1 and #3; other than race, the only other common characteristic among these two photographs that differentiates them from Photographs #2 and #4 were the broad smiles, (i.e., "looked nice," and "looked sweet" interpreted by the participants). Therefore, one may infer that broad smiles may be indicative of someone trustworthy to preadolescents. In comparison, the subjects selected Photographs #2 and #4 as least trustworthy; a young female with a gentle smile who was perceived as "tired," and "on drugs," and a middle-aged male demonstrating counseling attending behavior of open arms/palms up gesture who was perceived as "scary." It was also interesting to note that the professional counselor (Photograph #4) was not perceived as trustworthy by either subject. During the following question, "Have you even been in a situation in which you felt worried or scared being by yourself or around a person?" were omitted by both participants, and both elected to terminate the survey.

It was hoped that this section on personal safety would shed light on how youth live as neighbors with criminals, specifically, registered sex offenders. However, the subjects' sensitivity and personal rights to terminate the study were respected. Nonetheless, other researchers may find the avenues to obtain such data from children and youth. For this survey, the participants' responses ranged from optimism to references to evil may have confirmed a dire need for future research.

Summary and Implications

Due to prominent issues of at-risk behaviors and violence, many professionals have adamantly stated that prevention programs must be delivered to a younger population prior or at preadolescence to establish and stabilize healthy behaviors through adulthood. Thus, this author was initially interested in accessing the perceptions of preadolescents in regards to self-identity, relationships, bullying, and personal safety as well as the influence of learning from friends, family, school, and community. In regards to self-concept, the subjects' responses reflected awareness and self-empowerment as well as means of coping such as choosing to remember good things and learning from parents' mistakes. In regards to dating, the subjects' responses concurred with the literature but lack substantial learning (why, what, and how). In regards to bullying, although both subjects and preadolescent literature emphasized the importance of committed friendships, one subject reported her girlfriend had sent her a threatening internet message that made her feel sad. How then does bullying, cyber abuse, and being a bystander come into the definition of "friendship?" How is "commitment" to friendship adjusted to the reality of abused youth. Perhaps, one subject's comment of, "It is who we are," provides an allowance of bullying among friends (although the term "bullying" was not in the subjects' definition of friendship). If this is so, then at what point is the boundary crossed when a friend is now a stalker and is someone to be wary of? Even with earlier statements of empowerment, one subject wrote that she did not talk

openly anymore due to victimization. Although Perlstein (2004) wrote that preadolescents usually have more school-connectedness with their teacher and principals than with their family, this belief in school personnel to protect students from violent behavior failed. In regards to personal safety, although the subjects' refused to answer questions pertaining to safety in a world of consistent abuse as well as residing near registered sex offenders, it was hoped that other researchers may find sensitive avenues to obtain such data from youth.

The number of blank answers perhaps would be indicative of: 1) that the educational and intervention programs were not being implemented, 2) the educational and intervention program were implemented but not impactful as strongly recommended in the literature, 3) the material was not as the preadolescents' cognitive awareness, or 4) the violence experienced by the participants posed "shut down" responses. Since dating relationships are occurring at this age, knowledge of healthy relationships dynamics and boundaries were lacking, especially in confronting unwanted and threatening behavior. Follow-ups by adults and authority figures were also perceived as lacking, thus, allowing and promoting the acceptance of violent tendencies among youth. Although this study was limited to only two female subjects, their responses may provide insight to the awareness and lack of consistent and effective interventions from parents, schools, church, and community to reach the mindset of preadolescents, especially in regards to bullying and personal safety, and thus, possibly fuel the emotional disturbance residing as an undercurrent in youth.

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