

Identity crisis and aggressive behaviors in adolescents

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Abstract:

The spread of aggressivity in schools poses a risk on both professors and students; and what we read on the newspapers and see on TV channels is a proof of the propagation of this phenomenon in Algerian society. Proceeding from the above, the aim of our study is to research the causes of this phenomenon in order to address it or at least mitigate its effects. To do so we linked aggressivity to the identity variable and identity problem of adolescent, this later suffers from psychological alienation and loss of self-identity. Moreover, he faces compartmentalization because of the use of the identification with the aggressor in order to maintain his entity. Through the results obtained from the study of six scholars, we show that there is a positive relationship between identity and the aggressive behavior of adolescent.

Keywords: Identity, identity crisis, aggressivity, adolescence, projection.

1. Introduction:

In recent years, contemporary societies have experienced a series of transformations affecting the social, economic, and political spheres under the influence of technological advancements, which have become an integral part of human relationships. These changes have rendered individuals incapable of adapting, leaving them feeling emptiness and anxiety, and unable to satisfy their needs or achieve their goals in a society dominated by materialistic aspects at the expense of human values. This has led individuals to question their identity, destiny, and future.

Identity is considered a set of traits that distinguish an individual from others and make them unique. These traits encompass all aspects of the individual and are organized into a collection of physical, psychological, and social characteristics.

If identity is not achieved, the individual may feel alienation and a disconnection from the self, potentially leading to a crisis. Erik Erikson referred to this as an "identity crisis," which typically manifests during adolescence. At this stage, adolescents are in constant search of new ideals outside their family environment to identify with, aiming to reach the superego. They seek new traits through their relationships with peers and teachers to emulate them.

However, their ambitions may conflict with reality, leading to various negative reactions, including aggression and a sense of psychological self-loss. This is especially the case if adolescents are subjected to humiliation, ridicule, or even physical abuse. Such behaviors may compel adolescents to confront these experiences using psychological mechanisms to preserve their integrity and prevent fragmentation.

2. Problem Statement:

Humans can live in isolation, but they will not enjoy their lives. This is why all people strive to build bridges of relationships with a group, as the greatest aspect of life's enjoyment or happiness is achieved through interaction between individuals and others. An individual cannot feel happiness in isolation; the broader the environment with which they interact, the greater their happiness and enjoyment of life.

Belonging to a group enables an individual to define their existence within a social context and provides psychological continuity and stability, making them a complete and balanced person. At the same time, they distinguish themselves from others within the same group through unique characteristics. This differentiation defines our concept of self, referred to as identity. According to Michel Le Mellec, identity is "an integrated system of material, psychological, moral, and social attributes that encompasses a framework of cognitive integration processes. It is characterized by its unity, embodied in an internal spirit that includes the sense of identity and its perception. Identity is the unity of internal feelings, reflected in the unity of material elements, differentiation, continuity, and central effort." (Le Mellec, 1993, p. 15).

Failure to achieve identity in adolescence leads to its disturbance, role confusion, or the adoption of a negative identity, resulting in various disorders that manifest as psychological symptoms. Identity crisis is the primary problem during adolescence, as adolescents begin to question themselves: Who am I? This question throws them into a state of future uncertainty. (John Conger, 1986, p. 48).

Thus, the central question posed in this study is:

- Does identity crisis lead to aggressive behaviors in school-aged adolescents?
- Does projecting feelings of anger play a role in verbal aggression?

3. Hypotheses:

- **Main Hypothesis:** Identity disturbance in school-aged adolescents is a cause of aggressive behaviors.
- **Sub-Hypothesis:** We hypothesize that there is a relationship between identity crisis and verbal aggression in adolescents.

4. Concept Definitions:

4.1. Identity:

The term "identity" has gained significant attention from psychologists and sociologists in the modern era. The topic of identity and the challenge of its construction lead to understanding the concept of the identity crisis that adolescents experience in the process of self-construction.

- **Al-Hanafi** defines identity as the individual's continuous possession of a distinct entity separate from others, along with self-awareness. It can be considered equivalent to the ego. (Al-Hanafi, 1978, p. 379)
- **Erik Erikson** defines identity as the total sum of an individual's experiences, composed of two elements: ego identity and self-identity. Ego identity relates to achieving commitments in areas such as work, ideological, political, and religious values, as well as the individual's philosophy of life. Self-identity pertains to the personal perception of social roles. Erikson also mentions that identity has two dimensions: the ideological dimension and the social dimension. (Abdul Rahman, 1998, p. 287)

4.2. Identity Crisis:

An identity crisis is a period most adolescents go through at some point, during which they struggle with a lack of clear self-awareness or an inability to understand their present self, beliefs, values, attitudes, emotions, or what they aspire to become in the future. This leads to feelings of confusion, dependency, and uncertainty about what to do or believe in. It is a developmental relationship that can result either in a sense of identity or further internal disintegration, role confusion, or identity diffusion. (Abdul Rahman, 1998, p. 288)

4.3. Aggressiveness:

Definition by Laplanche and Pontalis: Aggressiveness is the tendency, or a collection of tendencies, manifested in real or imagined behaviors aimed at causing harm, destruction, coercion, or humiliation to others, among other actions. (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1987, pp. 222-223)

Definition by Anna Freud: Aggressiveness can be conscious or unconscious and is ambiguous in nature. It may originate from a vital need associated with the life instinct or result from a destructive impulse tied to the death instinct. The interplay between these two instincts gives rise to aggressiveness.

4.4. Adolescence:

Adolescence is the period between the ages of 12 and 20, characterized by physiological, psychological, and social changes. It is the stage where individuals achieve social and emotional maturity and acquire the skills necessary to become responsible adults, depending on the culture of the society in which they live.

4.5. Projection:

Projection is a fundamental mechanism underlying projective techniques, based on the hypothesis that a person constructs their world according to their internal state. Every behavior, perception, word,

or expression by an individual inherently reflects aspects of their personality. Thus, all projective tests serve as suggestive tools for this ordinary projective activity.

According to psychoanalytic theory, projection is a process by which an individual externalizes their own traits, desires, emotions, and goals, attributing them to another person or object. (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1987, p. 70)

5. Research Methodology:

5.1. The Clinical Approach:

Most researchers in social sciences and other fields rely on a fundamental cornerstone to achieve their desired objectives: the method employed to investigate characteristics, which determines the approach used in the study, commonly referred to as the research methodology.

The methodology adopted in this study is the clinical approach, which is based on case studies. This approach is utilized for diagnosing and treating individuals experiencing psychological disorders, sexual or moral deviations, or those facing adjustment problems, whether academic, personal, or social.

The clinical approach is applied to both adaptive and maladaptive behaviors. It is a refined research methodology that enhances our general knowledge in the field of psychology. As Reuchlin (1976, p. 99) states, "It involves an in-depth study of specific individuals, taking into account their development and condition while recognizing their value and human dignity. Through this process, we can understand individual cases, thereby gaining insight into the nature of humanity as a whole."

5.2. Research Tools:

• Case Study:

The case study approach relies on clinical observation and clinical interviews, which are two essential tools in scientific research. These tools were employed with methodological rigor. The process of gathering information focuses on the examinee's personal history to evaluate their personality and assess its cohesion and flexibility. The accuracy of the collected information largely depends on the honesty of the answers obtained through the relationship established with the examinee, the clarity of the questions posed, and the context in which these questions were addressed. Information was gathered through personal interviews and observation.

a. Clinical Interview:

A free clinical interview was used with the examinee, as it was deemed an effective method to gain deeper insights into their personality, interests, conflicts, and repressed thoughts. The objective was to explore both the past and present aspects of their life, establishing a connection between the two. This connection is based on interpreting events within the framework of their relationships with others.

The clinical interview can be divided into two parts:

- The first part focuses on establishing a relationship with the examinee.
- The second part involves uncovering information not addressed in the first part but using a different approach that avoids direct questioning.

As Bergeret (1986, p. 117) states, "The goal is to fill in the essential gaps of the conversation as much as possible, without enthusiasm or excessive striving for perfection, as this might quickly fade."

• **Semi-Structured Interview:**

In this study, we relied on the semi-structured interview, which involves asking the client to speak on a specific topic after establishing the interview conditions. This method employs a series of questions posed systematically and is particularly effective in mitigating moments of silence.

The primary objectives of using this type of interview were:

- To collect preliminary data about the case.
- To explore the relational aspects of the case within the context of family relationships.
- To understand the case's perspective on their aggressive behavior.
- To monitor the level of their emotional development.
- To assess their level of anxiety, defense mechanisms, and potential for identification.
- To examine their conflicts and projections.

b. Clinical Observation:

Clinical observation served as a fundamental tool in the case study, aiming to collect as much information as possible by documenting the examinee's behavior during the interview in real time. This approach helped reveal the personal characteristics of the examinee while precisely recording any changes occurring in the situation to avoid immediate misinterpretations. The observation process focused on various aspects, including the examinee's behavior during the interview, their attire, personal hygiene, gestures, and movements during the conversation, as well as the way they expressed their thoughts and plans. Essentially, it encompassed all aspects of their personality. Additionally, the observation sought to understand how the examinee interacted with the interviewer—whether they engaged actively or not. Impressions were recorded after each interview to address any shortcomings or errors from the previous sessions.

c. Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was one of the scientific tools we used to gather information. It consisted of a series of questions we considered essential for studying the case and included basic data about the examinee. The questionnaire provided general information about the case, focusing on aspects such as:

1. Name
2. Age

3. Social and educational status of the case
4. Educational level
5. Father's age, occupation, and educational level
6. Mother's age, occupation, and educational level
7. Number of siblings
8. The examinee's rank among siblings
9. Number of rooms in the residence
10. Absence of one or both parents during childhood
11. Whether either parent is remarried
12. Whether either parent has a physical or mental disability
13. Who the examinee currently lives with.

d. Projective Tests:

Projective tests involve presenting the examinee with an ambiguous stimulus, such as a sentence or an image, designed to provoke a response that reveals aspects of their personality. These tests aim to uncover the examinee's thoughts, motives, concepts, conflicts, emotions, desires, defense mechanisms, and frustrations. The ambiguous nature of the stimulus acts as a screen upon which the examinee projects their inner life.

According to Didier Anzieu (1980, p. 308): "Despite doubts about the validity of projective techniques, they do not always deserve to be classified as tests. However, their importance lies in representing a new way of practicing psychology, alongside techniques like interviews and behavioral observations. They form one of the foundational methods in clinical psychology, which is based on the dynamic concept of personality."

Since projective techniques are grounded in the concept of projection, they focus on the personality and are less technical and statistical compared to other tests. In a projective test, the individual is presented with minimally structured material, such as inkblots in the Rorschach test, which they interpret and build upon, projecting their own personality onto the material.

The prepared material for projection varies greatly, from simple stimuli like inkblots to more complex ones representing certain concepts of personality. While some interpretations can involve numerical coding and calculations, the analysis predominantly relies on qualitative rather than quantitative data. Using the results, psychologists can describe the individual's personality. This type of test is closely associated with psychoanalysis.

• **Rorschach Test:**

One of the projective tests we relied on in our study was the Rorschach Test, a projective test developed in 1918 by Hermann Rorschach. This test evaluates personality and provides precise insights into various domains, including intellectual, emotional, and imaginative aspects. Its

comprehensive nature places it at the forefront of other projective tests, as it is not influenced by current events.

The test assesses the presence of an integrated body image and provides scientific concepts and self-perceptions as a unified principle. It helps determine the psychological functions of the tested individual, both in relation to themselves and their interactions with others, within the framework of their external world relationships. Furthermore, the test aids in identifying the individual's sense of belonging, sexual tendencies, and aggressive behaviors. It serves as a field where multiple variables interact, uncovering hypotheses and theoretical measures, while also acting as a standardized diagnostic and assessment tool.

- **Presentation of the Rorschach Test:**

The Rorschach Test consists of ten (10) cards, each featuring a unique inkblot. These inkblots vary as follows:

- Cards **1, 4, 5, 6, and 7** display black, light gray, and white inkblots.
- Cards **2 and 3** add red to the black, gray, and white inkblots.
- Cards **8, 9, and 10** lack black ink and instead feature a range of colors, such as orange, green, yellow, blue, and pink.

Each card is numbered on the back. For the test, the cards are arranged in reverse order (the first card on top) and presented to the examinee. Ideally, the test should be conducted in a room with natural light. The examiner sits to the right of the examinee and presents the cards one at a time, moving to the next card only after the previous one has been completed.

The examinee is asked what they see in the inkblot, and they are given the freedom to interpret or even state that they see nothing. The responses are recorded and analyzed to derive conclusions regarding various aspects of the individual's personality.

Why the Rorschach Test Was Chosen:

The Rorschach Test was selected for the following reasons:

- It provides sufficient information about the emotional conflicts and relational disorders present in the examinee's personality.
- Through the process of projection, the test reveals the three dimensions of personality: emotional, cognitive, and social.
- Adolescence is characterized by psychological and social conflicts that disrupt the adolescent's balance. The test helps to highlight the equilibrium of the adolescent's personality, balancing their renewed inner life and social demands within a dialectical dynamic of progress and regression.
- The Rorschach Test engages both cognitive and creative activities, offering a subjective and imaginative expression. It is highly sensitive in projecting body images and parental figures with identificatory significance. (Works by Rausch N. de Tranbenberg; Braconnier & Marcelli, 1994: 69-70).

- The design of the Rorschach Test allows for the quick identification of issues related to adolescents' sexual identifications and their patterns.

In administering and analyzing the Rorschach Test, we relied on a specialized guide found in the book *"Psychodiagnostic"* (Rorschach, 1947) and the book *"Les Méthodes Projectives"* (Anzieu, 1976).

6. Presentation and Discussion of Research Results:

- **Case Study:**

The total number of interviews conducted was six, with each interview lasting 40 minutes. These interviews took place in the office of the educational counselor at El-Saniya New High School in Oran. The first interview began by collecting the initial data of the case, as previously mentioned. This was followed by asking questions related to the social situation, particularly the familial context, and the individual's relationships both within and outside the family.

Subsequent interviews focused on the issues the case had faced, especially their psychological experiences. The second-to-last interview was specifically dedicated to administering the Rorschach Test and presenting its results.

- **Case Presentation:**

- Murad, a 17-year-old, belongs to a family consisting of his mother and six siblings. His father passed away when he was 10 years old, and his middle brother died when Murad was 15. The family lives in a house spacious enough to accommodate all its members. Their financial support initially came from the father's business before his death, then from the now-deceased brother, and currently from the eldest brother, who has continued the family trade. The eldest brother serves as the primary provider, ensuring the family is financially stable, as their father's business was successful, supplemented by the efforts of the eldest brother.
- Murad's relationship with his family is positive, particularly with his mother, who holds deep affection for him and shows favoritism by fulfilling all his requests. His bond with his siblings is also strong. He considers himself fortunate, maintaining a close relationship with all of them, especially his 12-year-old twin sisters. He feels deeply responsible for them and cannot tolerate being at home in their absence.
- Murad's relationships with his peers, both inside and outside school, are generally good. He is well-liked by his friends but has one close friend, a confidant since sixth grade, whom he regards as a brother. The rest of his friends are casual schoolmates or neighbors.
- However, his interactions with the school administrative staff are poor due to his disrespectful behavior toward teachers, stemming from his academic struggles, lack of engagement during lessons, and his insolent demeanor. His behavior worsened after he was referred to the school disciplinary council, where he was reprimanded and almost expelled. He narrowly avoided this outcome thanks to the support of one teacher who advocated for him.

- At times, Murad experiences strange feelings about his place in society and his uncertain future, which he views negatively. He often thinks about his late father, whom he barely knew, and feels a strong need for his presence now.
- **Analysis of Rorschach Test Data:**
 - The percentage of **R = 22** indicates high productivity. This percentage is above the normal range for **R**, which suggests a strong conversational and imaginative capacity, coupled with a tendency for argumentation and a willingness to cooperate.
 - There is an imbalance in the distribution of responses across the cards. The highest number of responses is concentrated on cards (**II, III, IV, VI, VII, VIII**), while the lowest number is on card **V**, with only one response. This reflects disorganized productivity.
 - A modest number of commonly shared responses (4 in total) were observed, indicating weak participation and cooperation.
 - The total spatial codes identified include (**DbL, Do, Dd, D, G**), demonstrating a shift from general to specific. This indicates a lack of sequence or continuity in providing responses.
 - The **G responses = 10**, representing **45.45%**, suggest a deficiency in abstract thinking, particularly evident in cards (**VII, VI, V, IV, II, I**). The response on card **VII**, accompanied by **F-**, indicates a disturbance in the individual's perception of the external world, coupled with anxiety. Moreover, the **G responses** reflect the individual's mental orientation and tendency to perceive things holistically rather than in parts.
 - The percentage of **D = 54.54%** highlights an over-reliance on concrete thinking, with a corresponding deficiency in abstract thinking, as corroborated by the **G responses**. Additionally, the **D percentage** reflects the individual's social participation factor.
 - The **F = 54.54%** ratio suggests a reliance on the active formative pole in the subject's responses.
 - **K responses:** The absence of this type of response confirms instability in familial relationships.
 - The emotional reactions, combined with the transformation of anxiety related to the individual's sense of isolation and physical planning, indicate a projection of identification with parental imagery. This also reflects conflicts between emotional investment and ambivalence in relationships.
 - The absence of **C-type responses** suggests a suppression of emotional responses and an inability to express emotions. The **TRI** responses point to **Coarté**, indicating a blockage or a manifestation of real poverty and a tendency toward symbolic adjustment. This is often observed in cases with limited output or where emotional expression is hidden. The subject appears to endure pressure and restrictive situations, as evidenced by rigid defense mechanisms.
 - The **FC responses**, contrasting with **TRI**, highlight a conflict between the individual's internal inclinations and what they achieve or realize in reality.

- The case shows an **A percentage = 40.90%**, which signals an increase in stereotyped thinking (**Stéréotype**), translating into rigid and swift thinking. This percentage also reflects a clear delineation of the subject's area of interest. The heightened **A percentage** suggests defensive tendencies, where the subject attempts to mask their inner concerns and contradictions exposed by the test.
 - The **IA percentage = 22.72%** indicates the presence of anxiety. Although this percentage is relatively low, it does not rule out significant internal anxiety manifestations. These are often tied to deeply concerning topics and a multifaceted expression of discomfort, accompanied by repression.
 - The emotional maturity index reveals that the subject is emotionally immature.
 - **H < Hd**, which indicates a disturbance in the process of identification.
 - This was evident in **Card IV**, known as the "Father card," representing the superego and paternal authority according to psychoanalytic theory. The subject displayed difficulty in perceiving a coherent human figure, providing a fragmented image instead. This suggests fragility in the subject's identification with a paternal model.
- **General Summary of the Case:**

In conclusion, the findings derived from the subject's responses to the Rorschach test are as follows:

- The subject exhibits an overreliance on concrete thinking and an increase in stereotyped thought patterns.
- There are defensive tendencies in the subject, aimed at masking their anxiety regarding their current state and its outcomes.
- The test revealed relational disturbances, particularly with the subject's environment and family members, especially their father, reflecting difficulties in identifying with paternal authority.
- The same test highlighted a state of discomfort, tension, and a lack of social maturity.
- The subject feels a sense of helplessness and insecurity within social relationships.

7. Analysis of Results in Light of the Hypotheses:

Based on the interview, life narrative, and application of the Rorschach test, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Identity disturbance is attributed to the fragility of the Oedipal conflict.
- A deficiency in the psychological envelope, evidenced by difficulties in establishing boundaries between the internal and external worlds.
- A lack of internal creativity, withdrawal from the real world, and suppression of emotional expressions.

- Splitting of the paternal image at the phantasmatic level, with a conflict between libidinal and external aggressive drives.
- Damage and fragmentation of the body image.
- Withdrawal and disinterest in the external world.
- Sexual identity disturbance, with an inability to distinguish or establish sexual belonging, linked to the fragility of primary identifications.
- An inability to form relationships with external objects.

8. Conclusion:

This study began with a fundamental hypothesis suggesting a relationship between aggressive behaviors in school-aged adolescents and identity crisis. The partial hypotheses were aligned with this main hypothesis, focusing on the indicators of the two variables. After exploring the theoretical framework, following the case study steps, and applying the Rorschach test in the practical aspect, the following conclusions were reached:

- The partial hypothesis suggesting a relationship between identity crisis and external aggression was confirmed. It was anticipated that there would be a positive correlation between identity crisis and aggressive behavior, as supported by the findings from the Rorschach test.
- Dysfunctional family relationships played a significant role in the aggressive behaviors displayed by the case. This was negatively reflected in poor adaptation within the educational institution, as evidenced by acts of verbal abuse, threats, and offensive language directed at teachers. Additionally, the school environment contributed to the subject's aggressive behaviors, as some teachers displayed hostile attitudes, such as humiliation and belittlement.
- The Rorschach test revealed responses indicating anxiety, lack of confidence, feelings of neglect, dependence, identity fragmentation, and a poor self-image. These factors explain the behavioral disturbances observed in the case.

Through this modest study, we sought to address an essential aspect of adolescence: identity formation and the alienation that can result from failure to resolve the identity crisis.

The subject demonstrated defensive tendencies aimed at masking their anxiety regarding their current situation and its outcomes.

The test also revealed relational disturbances, particularly with the subject's environment and family members, specifically their father and their identification with him.

Additionally, the test highlighted a state of discomfort, tension, social immaturity, and a sense of helplessness and insecurity in social relationships.

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