

THE DUALITY OF SOCIAL SKILLS AS A PREMISE FOR POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMPETITION AMONG TEENAGERS

Paulius Skiecevicius, Vilma Zydziunaite

Kaunas University of Technology, The Institute of Educational Studies, Donelaičio str. 73, Kaunas, Lithuania

Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify, describe and substantiate a relation of social skills of teenagers and a tendency to offence as a negative competition in the contemporary society. Interpretative phenomenology, according Willig (2001), was chosen as a method for data analysis. The study revealed that in most cases teenagers do not have proper capabilities which are accepted in the community, and that are necessary in the daily relation with the people round about or to realize their personal goals. A lack of basic skills such as controlling of conflicts, permission and asking is noticeable among teenagers that participated in the investigation. They do not have enough working skills, which give a chance to be competitive members in the society.

Key words: *phenomenology, teenagers, negative competition, social skills.*

Juvenile delinquency is a part of common criminality, one of the reasons for continuing criminal behaviour in adulthood. Thorough analysis of this phenomenon, deeper perception is very important in order to understand its causality, while creating new, more effective programs of prevention. It should be noted that both, in Lithuania and in foreign countries, researchers in the research environment note the importance and significance of social skills in the different surroundings and situations, e.g. Vyšniauskytė Rimkienė (2004), Teresevičienė, Gedvilienė (2003), Maag (2005), Segrin (2000), Goldstein, Glick, Gibbs, (1998). Social skills are also considered to be as a premise for the successful socialization or resocialization of the delinquent children or teenagers (Liaudinskienė, 2005). The absence or lack of social skills is emphasized in the investigation, e.g. Molina, Dulmus, Sowers (2005). But there are no investigations performed so far where social skills would be as objects of investigation, seen as a premise for a negative inter competition of teenagers with a tendency to offence. ***In this article the delinquency is analyzed not as juridical phenomenon, which is usually treated negatively, but as one of the possible forms of personality adaptation and realization in the society.*** Individual usually choose a criminal carrier when he does not have enough social skills which are necessary to stay positive in the competitive modern society which is characterized as insecure and having sharp changes. Criminal carrier becomes the only one possibility of adaptation and self-expression.

The aim of the study is to identify, describe and substantiate the relation of social skills of teenagers and the tendency to offence as negative competition in the contemporary society. The Subject matter of this study is the relation of social skills of teenagers with the tendency to offence as a negative competition. The paper reveals the following complex questions of the subject matter: (1) Do social skills of a teenager and his reached particular purpose in the social environment have negative features of competition? Is it true that a teenager who has no social skills, but has a particular aim in the social environment, due to the aforementioned facts, has a tendency to offence, because he still has to be “competitive”? (2) How a teenager estimates his personal social skills?

Social skills - the determinant of socially accepted behaviour

The term “social skills” is associated with many related concepts, for example, interpersonal skills, interpersonal competence, social competence, and communicative competence. Often these concepts are confused with each other or used as synonyms. Conceptual definitions of social skills varies from the “possibility to increase at maximum the positive level of reinforcement, and to decrease “the power” of the negative response from the surrounding, as well as the “possibility to express feelings, interest, ambitions to the others” up to “positive and negative expression of feelings in the interpersonal context without the followed loss of social reinforcement” (Segrin, 2000). According to the latter author, the definition of social skills is also known as: the quality of effective interaction with each other in such a way, which is acceptable to both parties. Suitability indicates that the behavior of an active person does not affect social norms, values or expectations. It means that the people round about will not understand such behavior as negative. Effectiveness indicates that an active person with his behavior reaches or implements his intentions in relation with other people. According to Warger and Rutherford (1993) (cit. Johns et al, 2005), *social skills* are specific, recognizable, discreet, learnt models of behavior which consequence in social situations is positive social results. Mathur and Rutherford (1996) (ibid), name social skills as the models of socially accepted behavior, which enables people to reach social enforcement and acceptance avoiding negative social situations. Individual with necessary social skills can control his social surrounding, understands and effectively reacts to the social situations. One fact is often emphasized that people do not “have” them, when speaking about social skills. And it is rarely considered to the fact that people may not want or do not know how to use their social

skills. Gresham (1997) (cit. Spence, 2003), distinguishes drawbacks of social *skills learning* and its *usage*. Drawback or inadequate usage of social skills is seen, when young person has skills, which are necessary to behave in a socially accepted way, but he fails to apply them to the one or several situations. The drawbacks of the usage can appear due to many factors - absence of emotional, cognitive skills, due to perversion of situation or competitive behavior. Social skills which teenagers do not have are investigated in the works of aforesaid authors, also they give recommendations how to develop, form, etc. them. But in the investigations teenagers' social skills and their usage for making criminals are not analyzed.

Teenager's tendency to offence as the form of negative competition

In the age of globalization it is very difficult or almost impossible to avoid competition which appears in different intense and forms. According to Bonta (1997), in the modern society individual is encouraged to be competitive since his childhood. Parents often use competitive methods of education in every situation of life, which encourages a child to be the first, resist to others, regard to one's interests - in some way to be individualist. In the psychological literature (e.g. Myers, 2000), a fact is emphasized that competition incites aggression. According to Bonta (1997), the results of many accomplished investigations reveal that competitive mood incites the intensification of aggressive behavior. Tendencies of aggressive behavior endure even when such behavior is not pointed to the opponent.

In Foucault's (1961) (cit. Sharland, 2006), opinion the late modern society is occupied by risk and uncertainty. According to the Giddens (1999) (cit. Sharland, 2006), risk, instability, uncertainty are the hallmark of the modern "rushing world". Collapse of institutional constraint and many new-formed threats destabilized social structures and minimized future reliability. Juvenescence is "provided" with opportunities and similarly with risk. Boehnke, Winkels (2002), claims that extreme changes in the society comprise number of increased delinquency. It is considered that the growth of delinquency rate is a consequence of the extreme political and economical changes. Social changes in the form of economic challenges that have no precedent cause stress in families, affect relationship between parents and relax their attention to the care and communication given to their children. Teenagers in the same situation could be liable to choose a delinquent behavior. When teenagers understand that sudden changes in the society overtake their chances to adapt to them, they can feel strong sense of injustice. Sudden social changes weaken social control and give more freedom of illegal behavior.

Griesinger and Livingston (1973) (cit. Kuzdin, 2000), in the two - dimension circle of interpersonal orientation inserts competition between individualism and aggression. The consequence of aggressive behavior is maximum benefit to oneself and almost minimum benefit to the others. According to these authors aggression half a time reduces benefit to oneself, but it takes maximum from the others. Thus competition is dependent on the present situation and could be closely related to the extremely individualistic or aggressive behavior.

It is possible to distinguish dual competition (Skiecevičius, 2007): (1) **Positive**, which is understood as a factor, stimulating development, improvement, which depends on the rights and interests of the people round about. (2) **Negative**, which is understood as a factor causing negative results and in this way making premises for the person to be competitive.

The strategy of individual's behavior that is based on the negative competition is illustrated by the one of the parts of rational choice theory - *gambling theory*. The focus of gambling theory is directed to how people choose from collaboration, competition and overusing. In the theory is stated that people who reach their target, follow rational option in reducing expenses to the maximum and extremely raising profit (Johnson, 1995). The critical situation of this article context is the absence of social skills, which leads to the negative competition causing negative results. Individual who does not have enough social skills but still remains positively competitive member of the society risks to get into the social isolated groups. According to Abrams et al. (2005), it is researched proved that the social isolation has significant impact to the person's behavior. Isolated members of the society become more aggressive not only to the group of people that participated in their social isolation but also to the people who did not play any role in this process. According to the Justickis (2001), a teenager who cannot adapt in the community is considered to be a loser. Such status causes his dissatisfaction - frustration. It is maintained that for the teenager who gets experience to commit a crime safely, avoiding arrest and beating a rap, opens a profitable way of delinquent carrier. A teenager has more chances to reach his target if he gets enough skills that are necessary for a criminal act. Selection of legal or illegal policy depends not only to whether individual has a legal access to reach his target but also whether individual himself has an access to criminal act and criminal carrier. For delinquency as well as for legal activity learnt skills and also a permission of authoritative person for particular activity are necessary. Delinquency is associated with anger and aggression, often wrongly, but actually spurt of anger interrupts both legal and illegal activity.

According to the theory of conflicts Taylor et al, (1973) (cit. Giddens, 2005), claims that individuals themselves choose behavior which is illegal because of inequalities of capitalistic system. In the theory of stress, Merton (1938) (cit. Schmallegger, 2004), claims that innovation, as a form of adaptation in society appears when a method of reaching target focused in society is directly related to the limitation of reaching it in socially accepted ways. According to this theory, when a teenager has not enough social skills, a choice of delinquent behavior could be observed as some kind of innovation, which enables person to stay a competitive member of the society competing in a negative form. If person who lives in a competitive society is not ready to *compete positively* – does not have enough social skills, it is possible that attaining to avoid social isolation he will try to realize himself by acting criminally. Delinquency is one of the *negative forms* of competition. It is a way of self-expression, possibility to remain competitive in the society without socially accepted skills that are necessary for it.

Every day teenagers face many different situations posing one or other challenge. The effective control of social world requires complex range of social skills as well as the skills for solving interpersonal problems (Spence, 2003). Understanding delinquency as the form of negative competition encourages looking for alternatives of the solutions of this problem. One of them - social skills teaching programs, based on empowering partnership, as intervention strategy working with delinquent teenagers, seeking that teenagers would remain competitive members of the society in socially accepted ways.

Research methodology

The type of *research sample* - objective practical. 10 respondents participated in this study. All of them are boys of 15 - 18 years old who serve their sentence in the Lithuanian imprisonment institution. The sentence time varies from six months to six years. Most teenagers do not live with their biological parents. Most of the investigated families are not accordant, sometimes –dysfunctional. Half participators of the investigation are participating in ART (Aggression replacement training) - the group of controlling aggression and moral reasoning. *Data collecting method* is half structured interview. Interview consists of 10 questions. The time of interview was from 14 to 24 min. *Interpretative phenomenology*, according Willig (2001), was chosen as a method for data analysis. Phenomenology seeks to reveal phenomenon (what's that?) and the way in which this phenomenon appears (how?); investigates more than reality, which is an objective in the mean of materialistic or naturalistic (Kvale, 1996; Mickūnas, Stewart, 1994). The purpose of interpretative phenomenology is to reveal participant experience in his interpersonal perspective, i.e. to reveal how participant himself understands his own experience (Willig, 2001).

Research results

In the data analysis 41 clusters have been extracted. Few of them clearly show that social skills are important premise in the competition among teenagers. Below is shown the analysis of picked clusters.

Risk degree. Teenager chooses a quick way to get an item, which is risky because legal way, according to him requires training, hard preparation and a lot of time. Risky, often delinquent way of purchasing is valued because of its simplicity, with no efforts and long preparation. “...*I took that phone. Run away and that's all...*” One of the reasons why teenager decides to risk is the shorter time of consumption necessary to get an item. With these motives teenager even if he has possibility to earn legally without risk, chooses quick purchase, which is risky. Sometimes teenager chooses risky way of getting an item as a second alternative, even if he has resources to get an item legally. Option to risk is related to the negative future image. Not having clear future perspective and feeling the lack of specific skills, teenager chooses the risk as the only one alternative to satisfy his wishes and to survive. Accomplished custodial sentence determines teenager's choice to estimate risk degree before making a decision how to behave, but it does not take the intention of quick purchasing. Friends of the teenager would behave like he does – quickly, but with risk. Running away from home is related with a loss of possibility to satisfy necessary personal demands that is why risky, delinquent, quick purchase is understood as possibility to survive (table 1).

Table 1

Cluster „Risk level“.		
Cluster	Subject	Argument
RISK LEVEL	Quick purchase	...I could work in the foster home, but I did not go - I better stole. Because you get money faster, more and easier...
	Pessimistic future perspective	...I'm going to that school; it goes not very well... I need... I would risk.
	Measured option to risk	..To steel... I have to think, because I am out of penitentiary - I need to think... If steel so needs to think is it possible to do it now, or this...
	Similarity of friends behavioral model	...Of course I stayed with friends who, you know, stole, so... It used to be that they run away from home and they didn't have you know what... So they had to steal. <.> I'm thinking it would be the same now...
	Deficit of legal purchase experience	...I did not go to work... You steel something and buy what you need for those money - bicycle...

Critical alternative. Teenager prefers borrowing or exchanging, but if these ways are not possible in the specific situation or when compromise, which is suitable for both parts, is not found then extortion is chosen. This option depends on how well a teenager knows the owner of the thing. If it is a friend - he starts to hesitate, if it is only acquaintance - he choose extortion without hesitation. If members of a family cannot give wanted item, teenager is ready to break the rule in order to reach his target.

Uncompromised purchase. Teenager would try to avoid responsibility related with the usage of that item without any permission given in advance. The possibility of principal embezzlement increases in the situation, when sometime earlier teenager had no permission to use the specific item, and now he needs it very much. Teenager would take that item “on principle” - then any permission makes no sense. In the teenager’s mind dominates valid principles of imprisonment subculture- if did not give, then “slush”. It means that permission is asked, but when negative answer is received – embezzlement of an item is “legalized”. Teenager who follows valid “laws” of imprisonment subculture, asking of permission associates with uncompromised purchase.

Repression of ourselves. Teenager’s past experience is usually related to the illegal activity and risk while implementing his aim. Choice of legal activity if it is chosen as a way to reach the aim is directly related with the earlier experience of a teenager- unsuccessful efforts to purchase (what he wants) under risk and having problems with police. Finished sentence encourages teenager to think about possible consequences of his activity, but such thinking usually restricts with analysis – how to “successfully implement a crime”.

Criminal skills. The cluster reveals the absence of necessary skills for making criminal activity. Teenager does not go away when he gets failed, he keeps trying to make his plans: “but it happened somehow” (table 2).

Table 2

Cluster „Criminal skills“.		
Cluster	Subject	Argument
CRIMINAL SKILLS	Lack of skills to make a crime	Many were! First time I wanted to steel a car - I did not how... Still it happened somehow...
		...I wanted to steel a car, but I could not drive...

Delinquent purchase. Teenager doubts and considers alternatives of legal work and delinquent behavior in order to reach his aim. He rejects legal way to get an item, because when teenager wants something - he takes risk. If there are no other legal ways of getting an item, then it is resolved to make a crime. First idea, which comes to the teenager who wants but can’t get something, is to steel. Teenager is tending to take wanted thing, but he would invoke other people. If the thing belongs to his friend, teenager would consider to the friendship closeness, but if necessary he would steel. Teenager would take wanted thing from a person he does not know at all. He considers and legal option of getting a thing, but financial resources necessary for it would be saved by illegal activity. Teenager who wants to get wanted thing would risk (table 3).

Table 3

Cluster “Delinquent purchase”.		
Cluster	Subject	Argument
DELINQUENT PURCHASE	Extortion invoking the others	Thought? <.> To take away from him... But i will not do it myself...
	Extortion from unknown	...Unknown, <.> of course, if an item is good. I would take...

Discussion

Individual behaves in one way or another in order to change consequences. If consequences are positive - such behavior gets reinforcement (Perminas et al, 2004). Not looking for a ways, unwillingness or inability to get an item legally, forces teenager to choose delinquent way of purchasing. Also when teenager wants something very much, legal purchase of an item is rejected, and then he considers only his wishes, rejecting interests of the other persons and public norms.

In the subculture of delinquent persons, delinquent behavior takes the legal form (Schmallager, 2004). Analysis of research data revealed that teenagers recognizing lack of social skills necessary for positive competition, resolves to negative competition. Teenager understands negative competition as “productivity”: giving quicker and higher remuneration with not many efforts. Not having necessary socially accepted skills teenager’s behavior based on the negative competition becomes the only one possibility to reach his aim. Clear aim and understanding, that due to the lack of socially accepted skills its implementation becomes impossible, encourages teenager to compete negatively. Such behavior gives a positive result to a teenager. Negative competition is a way to avoid social isolation, possibility to stay competitive in the society, even negatively, belonging to the delinquent subcultures.

Performed investigations by Tarolla (2002), Spence (2003), proved that teaching of social skills has a direct impact to the reduction of teenager’s delinquency number. Such an aspect is confirmed by this performed investigation. Enabling person to stay positively competitive, having social skills, confirm the premise that negative competition is a way of surviving without any socially accepted skills necessary to reach a particular aim. Research revealed the relation between the lack of teenager’s social skills and the selection of negative competition. This is a competitive model.

Teaching of social skills is often being considered as having preventive and empowering effect. However, one way presentation of particular information, traditionally called as “teaching” (when the provider of information reputed as an authority, the receiver – juvenile, who “must” accept such an information and to “use”) scilicet – *educational domination* is not effective. In the subculture of delinquent juveniles such teaching method is often ignored concerning reluctance to conciliate with the positions of “subordinate” and “authority”. Addressing the before mentioned aspects, the need of new educational prevention means emerges. Considering the given results of the research and personal practical experience working with incarcerated juveniles, implementation of *empowering partnership* strategy (using which both teacher and learner have equal status – they both are active partners in the learning process) may positively influence the learning process and simultaneously serve as a mean of educational prevention.

Conclusions

- Individual since his childhood is taught competitive behavior. Ability to compete in the age of globalization is understood as the guarantee for successful survival. In most cases individual learns competitive behavior in the surrounding environment. Individual is trying to avoid social isolation (which is often related to the incapability to stay competitive in the particular field) and is constrained to compete. In the modern society which is characterized as having sudden changes and risk, becomes more difficult for people to adapt to the requirements posed by society. Often people do not have possibilities to get proper social skills necessary to be positively competitive members of society. Such adaptation and acquirement of skills becomes very important in the stage of adolescence, when individual is looking for his identity. Not having enough social skills necessary for positive competition is likely that teenager would choose alternative functioning, based by negative competition. It is a way of self-expression in order to avoid social isolation and stay competitive, even negatively. Teenager’s delinquency is one of the ways of negative competition, not having relevant social skills being competitive in the socially accepted ways.
- Investigation revealed that in most cases teenagers do not have relevant skills accepted in the society which are necessary in the daily interaction with the people round about and in implementing personal goals. Among teenagers who participated in the investigation the lack of basic social skills e.g. control of conflicts, asking permission is noticed. Also they do not have enough profession, working skills, which helps to stay positively competitive members of society. Also the absence of criminal skills necessary for making a crime is noticed. In most cases respondents choose illegal way of item purchase, which is valuated due to its “quickness” and “productivity”. Teenagers are encouraged to offence when they do not see any future perspectives, which are closely related with the lack of social skills. Teenagers understand that the lack of necessary social skills restrict their possibilities to implement personal desires in the ways acceptable by society. In such way delinquent activity becomes the only one alternative to reach the target.

- Empirical investigation revealed that teenagers feel the shortage of community in their surrounding, closest environment. Often there are not enough members in their families who would teach them behavioral models or their teaching is not accepted. Behavioral models in the particular situation usually are chosen at the teenager's discretion. Investigation revealed that the family environment is not the first area, where teenagers learn social skills. It is usually replaced by the microsystems of friends and acquaintances, where delinquent, negative competition based behavior is valued. Among participants "cleverness" is valued - the ability to make criminal offence perfect. The synthesis of the reviewed theory and empirical results allows to claim, that the teaching of behavioral models out of teenager's closest environment, the lack of social skills, quick purchase (e.g. wanted item) and evaluation of the model of the delinquent behavior among teenagers, are the main factors determining the choice of the model of "survival", which is based on the negative competition.

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