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Research Article

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND AGGRESSION IN YOUNG ADULthood

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ABSTRACT

The basis of individual differences in terms of the tendency to violence has been the subject of many studies. In this case, the concepts of “domestic violence”, “social learning” and “intergenerational transmission” have emerged. According to Bandura's social learning theory, behavioral stereotypes are learned through social observation and role modeling. Intergenerational transmission theory also plays a supportive role. According to this theory, the child who observes violent behavior is used as a method of coping and problem-solving in the family; normalizes, learns, and therefore adopts it as a coping method. As a result, he/she can exhibit violent behavior during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Based on all this information; the hypothesis claims that there is a significant correlation between being exposed to childhood trauma and aggression in young adulthood. In this study, the data about childhood trauma and aggression levels were collected from 443 young adults between the ages of 18-25 who are studying psychology, law, health sciences, foreign languages, and engineering at a foundation university in Istanbul by Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ). As a result of the analysis, a positive correlation was found between the scale scores. Male participants got significantly higher scores on BPAQ than females.

Keywords: *domestic violence, trauma, social learning, intergenerational transmission, aggression*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of psychological trauma finds its place in the literature with the definition of “exposure of the individual to a situation that threatens his / her life and/or vital order or witnessing that someone else is exposed to it”. The most important characteristics of traumatic events that differ from other stressors are that they often develop suddenly and exceed the person's coping capacity (Aker, 2012). Psychological traumas are divided into two as human-made traumas and natural disasters and accidents. Psychological traumas arising from a human-made events such as violence and terrorism; are thought to be more challenging and psychologically destructive than traumas resulting from natural events because human-made traumatic events can directly affect the individual's belief in the just world and his view of society and interpersonal relations. (Hermann, 2016).

The most important issues of childhood psychological trauma cases are family; the group that takes place in most of the life of children, and domestic violence. Domestic violence means through pressure and force; physical, psychological, economic, and sexual harm and abuse of people living in the same household or identifying themselves as a member of the same household, depending on risk factors such as gender inequality, power imbalance, the region and the cultural structure of the society, and neglecting each other physically and emotionally (Stewart and Robinson, 1998). Emotional neglect; not giving enough psychological support, attention and affection and not reflecting child's emotions, might cause the child not to establish a secure bond with his/her caregiver and to resort to this model in their interpersonal relationships in the future and it is also harmful beside physical violence (Kelly and Johnson, 2008). Childhood emotional neglect and maltreatment can cause obtaining maladaptive schemas about interpersonal relationships and life and can cause emotion regulation deficits. A study reveals that aggressive behavior and emotional maltreatment are in a relationship and this relationship partially mediated by neuroticism and psychoticism (Wang *et al.*, 2019). According to another study conducted by Ertürk, Kahya, and Gör, maladaptive schemas and emotional regulation deficits due to childhood emotional maltreatment are in a relationship between adulthood aggression in a Turkish sample consists of 291 participants (Ertürk *et al.*, 2020).

The most remarkable risk factors of domestic violence are; a perpetrator who is also a victim of violence in the past and who normalized violence as a coping strategy, low socioeconomic status, sticking to gender roles and beliefs according to gender roles and male hegemony (Page and İnce, 2008). Domestic violence is seen as a quite high rate for females, children, and the elderly (Polat, 2017). But, even if it is believed that domestic violence occurs as only male violence to females and children, it can also be seen as female violence especially to children if the woman has normalized violence by being a violence victim in her past life. (Dong *et al.*, 2004). Also, women who had been victims of physical or psychological violence in their own family before marriage or who had witnessed such violence (especially violence perpetrated by their fathers against their mothers) were also found to have a significantly higher risk of being subjected to violence from their spouses than women who did not have such a history (Coker *et al.*, 2000).

An important concept associated with violence is aggression. Aggression is the act of using power with the motivation to dominate, defeat and manage (Erten and Ardalı, 2001). Some argue that violence is found in the individual as a basic motive, but there are underlying risk factors for the emergence of violence with an aggressive attitude to harm the individual and the society. Since predation (as defined in biology, the habit of eating other species to provide itself with the necessary substances to live or survive) is a frequently observed event among living things, some define predation as the main motivation of violence (Polat, 2017). Today, one of the most widely used models when explaining the reasons for the emergence of aggression tendency in a way that harms individuals and society is the ecological model.

According to the ecological model, violence; arises from interactions at different levels of the social environment (Heise, 1998, Polat, 2017). According to the ecological model, the risk factors of the aggressive attitude of the individual interact with each other like an intertwined circle. In the outermost circle, there is society, then the region inhabited, and then relations. It refers to the normalization of violence in the society, region, and social relations in this region. The innermost circle represents the individual. It is thought that the individual's exposure to violence in childhood or observing and experiencing violence in the family is an important risk factor for him/her to become a violent practitioner at a later age. The person who has learned violence as a coping method in the family will start to behave violently in his/her future life. In short, this model defends the transmission of violent acts from generation to generation through learning. (Polat, 2017)

According to the literature, there are different risk factors, which are related to violent behavior, which can be seen as a result of correlational studies. These can be socioeconomic status, media, and popular culture, psychopathologies such as personality disorders. (User *et al.*, 2002). It is important to consider that psychopathologies containing violent behavior, media and pop-culture which are related with also aggression and some aggression-related pathologies might be also under the influence of social learning.

The concept of learning, which is an important factor in the occurrence of violence, highlights the relationship networks and behaviors within the family. For this reason, many theories emphasize learning. One of the theories based on learning is Social Learning Theory. This theory, developed by Albert Bandura, argues that “domestic violence is something learned directly or indirectly through observation of important role models in the family during the transition from childhood to adulthood” (Özgentürk *et al.*, 2012).

According to Social Learning Theory, individuals, especially children, are not passive learners. They actively interact with their environment and learn actively through social observation. In environments such as households and schools, their interactions determine the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. This determination has a quite remarkable place in their identity construction. Social Learning Theory argues that violent acts are learned like other behaviors. Individuals who are subjected to violence in or around the family or who witnessed violence, normalize this situation and carry it to their future lives. Violence is transmitted from generation to generation in this way. (Özgentürk *et al.*, 2012).

Because of traumatic experiences in childhood, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety-based disorders can be observed besides the tendency to illegal behavior and substance use (Renn, 2002). Psychological blunting, behavioral disorders, irritability, mood disorders can also be observed (Genç *et al.*, 2017). Norman's meta-analysis consists of 124 studies, has revealed that there are statistically significant associations among physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and depressive disorders, suicide attempts, risky sexual behaviors (Norman *et al.*, 2012). Due to insecure attachment in childhood, unhealthy and / or disconnected relationships with the family and internalization of this relationship model; difficulty in establishing relationships, paranoia, insecurity towards others and introversion can be observed in adulthood (Renn, 2002). As a result of actively social learning of all this violence, the individual might have an aggressive tendency and even become a direct perpetrator of violence. Also, DSM 5 includes aggression and anger as a diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder. According to DSM 5 “irritable behaviors and angry outbursts” are PTSD symptoms (Ross, 2015).

Based on all these outcomes, there might be a relationship between childhood traumas and the level of aggression and violence might be passed down from generation to generation.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the relationship between childhood trauma and aggression in young adults studying in different fields in İstanbul with scientific methods.

It has been hypothesized that the childhood psychological trauma as a result of psychological, physical, sexual abuse and neglect and measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) will have a positive relationship with the aggressive attitude level measured by the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ) in young adulthood. In the study, the hypothesis has been tested by using these scales, with 443 young adults aged between 18-25, and analyzing data on SPSS.

Another importance and purpose of the research is; as an alternative to the studies conducted with children and adolescent samples in the literature, it has chosen university students in Istanbul, are candidates of different professions and are in a different developmental period (young adults between the ages of 18 -25) as sample to reveal the relationship between childhood trauma and aggression level. The study aims to show whether aggression associated with childhood traumas can be seen not only in childhood or adolescence but also after adolescence.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Current research has been done in a foundation university in Istanbul with 443 volunteer participants with the aim of observing the correlation between childhood human-related psychological traumas and young adulthood aggression. The randomly assigned sample (provided that they fit the age and department standards) has been reached through the university's digital student groups, mail groups, social media groups and the scales were submitted online via Google Form. Of the 443 people in the sample, 332 define their gender as female, and 111 define their gender as male. Participating students were selected between the ages of 18-25, and also the departments of the students were taken into account during the research. The sample consists of 99 law, 100 engineering, 100 health, 100 psychology and 44 language students.

2.2. Materials

In current research, Turkish version of Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Şar *et al.*, 2012), Turkish version of Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Madran, 2012) and demographic information form have been used.

2.2.1. Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) is a scale that evaluates participant's level of exposure to psychological trauma in childhood. Scale includes 28 items consisting of physical violence, psychological/emotional violence, sexual harm and physical and emotional neglect sub-factors. Five sub-scores and a total score represent the level of exposure to trauma which consist of submitting of that five sub-scores, obtain from the scale. The scale is a 5-point Likert type scale where each item is scored between 1 (never) - 5 (always). According to the validity and reliability study of Şar and colleagues, as a result of factor analysis, it can be seen that the Turkish version of the scale also has five-factor structure and these factors represent the 72.5% of variance. Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the whole scale was 0.93. (Şar *et al.*, 2012)

2.2.2. Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)

The aggression levels of the participants have been evaluated with the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire. The scale is an adaption of Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory, 5-point

Likert-type and includes 29 items. (Buss and Durkee, 1957). The Scale has four sub-factors: physical aggression, verbal aggression, hostility and anger. Each item is scored between 1(never) – 5(always).

Turkish version's validity and reliability scores had been determined by H. Andaç Demirtaş Madran. According to explanatory factor analysis, the Turkish version of the scale also has four factor structure and explains the 41.4% of variance (Madran, 2012). The Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of the whole scale is 0.85. Coefficients of physical aggression, verbal aggression, hostility and anger sub-scales are 0.78, 0.48, 0.71, 0.76 respectively. (Madran, 2012) According to t-test analysis, there was a significant difference between female and male participants in terms of physical aggression ($p < ,001$). Male participants ($X = 22,85$, $std = 6,0$) got significantly higher scores from physical aggression sub-scale than female participants ($X = 20,38$, $std = 6,1$) (Madran, 2012).

2.2.3. Demographic Information Form

Demographic Information Form has been used with the aim of getting information about participant's age, department and gender.

2.3. Procedure

Data has been gathered online via Google Form. Participants submitted scales voluntarily after they read and confirmed the Informed Consent Form. With the aim of observing the correlation between childhood trauma and aggression, participant's total scores of Buss Perry Aggression Scale and total scores of CTQ have been observed on Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Pearson correlation analyses and regression analyses have been deemed appropriate. Whether there is a significant difference between genders has been determined by chi-square analysis and the means were examined.

3. Results

Table 1 includes results of explanatory analysis. Due to examining the data by Pearson correlation analysis, it has been revealed that there is a positively significant correlation between two scale's total scores. ($p < .001$, correlation coefficient = .403*) Table 2 shows the result.

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Sample

Gender	
Female	332
Male	111
Other	-
Department	
Psychology	100
Law	99
Health	100
Engineering	100
Foreign Languages	44
Age	
18-25	21,55*
*Mean	

Table 2: Correlation Between Aggression Level and Childhood Trauma

	BPAQ
CTQ	
	<i>Pearson Correlation Coef.</i>
Sig.	
BPAQ	1,000
<,001	
CTQ	,403**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Also, simple linear regression analysis reveals a positively significant correlation between two variables. (total scores of two questionnaires) ($p < .001$, $F(1,441) = 85,602$). Table 3 is added. Due to all analyses, it can say that there is a relationship between aggression level and childhood traumas in Turkish young adulthood, college student sample.

Table 3. Regression Analysis Coefficients of BPAQ – CTQ Relation

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		95,0% Confidence Interval for B		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	54,433	2,396		22,715	,000	49,723	59,142
	CTQ	,566	,061	,403	9,252	,000	,446	,687

*. Dependent Variable: BPAQ

Additionally, in this study correlations between questions taken one by one from both scales have been observed.

As a result of correlation analysis; although there is no mention of a strong relationship due to examining questions one by one rather than examining the whole scale, it can be observed that there is a negative correlation between the score of “my childhood was perfect” sentence and the total score of Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire ($p < .001$) (correlation coefficient = $-.167^{**}$). Similarly, there is a negative correlation between the score of “my family is the best in the world.” sentence and the total score of BPAQ. ($p < .001$) (correlation coefficient = $-.193$).

Whether there is a significant difference between female and male participants in terms of the responses to the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire and thus the aggressive attitude has been evaluated on SPSS through chi-square analysis. As a result of the analysis, it is seen that there is a significant difference between the answers given to the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire between female and male participants ($p = .046$). (Table 5). As a result of the descriptive analysis, it was determined that the mean score that male participants got from the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire was **82.504 (std = 17.524)**, and the mean score that female participants got from the same scale was **73.060 (std = 17.142)**.

Whether there is a significant difference between female and male participants in terms of exposure to trauma in childhood has been examined through chi-square analysis by evaluating the responses of the participants to the CTQ. It was observed that there was no significant difference in the answers given by the female and male participants to the CTQ ($p = .403$). (Table 6). As a result of the descriptive analysis, it was seen that male participants got

a mean of **36,234 points from the CTQ (std = 10,966)**, while female participants got a mean of **37,352 points (std = 13.105)**.

Table 1: Relation Between Gender and Aggression

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	102.439	80	.046
Likelihood Ratio	117.275	80	.004
N of Valid Cases	443		

Table 6: Relation Between Gender and Childhood Trauma

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-Square	55.907	54	.403
Likelihood Ratio	65.037	54	.144
N of Valid Cases	443		

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the literature, the hypothesis that childhood psychological traumas will be related to aggression in young adulthood has been tested, and the statistical analysis revealed that there is a positive, linear and significant relationship between the CTQ and the BPAQ, and the hypothesis has been confirmed. It is observed that if the scores of the participants from the CTQ increase, their score from the BPAQ also increases. In light of these findings, it can be said that childhood traumas are predictors of aggression. In addition, it is observed that there is a negative relationship between the participants' positive evaluation of their childhood family life and their aggressive attitudes today, and the more positive the participant evaluates childhood family life, the lower the score on the aggression scale is. Aggressive attitudes of the participants increased as their past family life became negative. As a result of evaluating the questions taken from two different scales with each other and observing the relationship between them, findings supported the literature and the hypothesis has been confirmed. Therefore, it has been observed that childhood psychological traumas are associated with aggressive attitudes.

In accordance with the literature and the hypothesis, these findings suggest that individuals who have been exposed to trauma, especially domestic violence, during childhood have develop a more aggressive attitude in their young adulthood due to their internalization of violence as a way of coping. In a research conducted by Kernsmith, there is a relationship between being exposed to domestic violence and abuse and feelings of fear and powerlessness and high threat perception. Sample was using violence as a self-defense. Participants who reported more traumatic childhood experiences were more likely to report self-defense as a motivation of violent behavior (Kernsmith, 2006). A study by Mumford et al which conducted with representative US youth (18-32) sample examines relationship between childhood adversity and aggression toward partner, friends and strangers. Also study considers the other risk factors of violent behavior such as substance abuse, recent life stressors and psychopathology and emotional well-being. According to results, consistent with hypothesis, there is a relationship between childhood adversity (physical and sexual abuse) and verbal

aggression toward strangers and friends, regardless of current mental health, substance use, stressors etc. (Mumford *et al.*, 2019) In some other studies on this subject, results supporting this study have been obtained. In a study conducted by Ayan with sixth, seventh and eighth-grade students to measure the aggression tendencies of children subjected to violence within the family, it has been found that the students who were exposed to violence had more aggression tendencies (Ayan, 2007). In another study conducted on a similar topic, the relationship between students' exposure to domestic violence and their use of violence against others and their aggression tendencies has been examined. In this study, individuals who stated that they were exposed to physical violence by their fathers at least once during their childhood and adolescence have been compared with those who stated that they were never exposed to this type of violence and a statistically significant difference has been found between the mean of physical aggression score. It has been revealed that people who have been subjected to physical violence by their fathers before are more prone to physical aggression (Duran and Ünsal, 2014). In another study showing similar results to this study, the relationship of domestic violence with academic achievement and aggression have been examined. It has been concluded that being exposed to domestic violence is a predictor of aggression, lower school success and negative studying habits. A significant relationship has been found between family violence and aggression (Öztürk *et al.*, 2014). Study examines intimate partner violence among young men involved in justice system, reveals the relationship between childhood traumas and violent behavior. There was shown a relationship between being intimate partner violence (IPV) victim and IPV perpetrator. Emotional and physical IPV are correlated with adolescences traumas due to violence (Wagers *et al.*, 2021). In a study conducted by Brumley *et al.*, the sample experienced at least one adverse childhood event, has significantly higher levels of problem behaviors (substance use, violent behavior and less optimistic future expectations) (Brumley *et al.*, 2017). Different from all these studies, studies focusing on attachment reveal negative correlation between secure attachment (interpersonal attachment without emotional and physical abuse and also neglect) and aggression. For instance, according to Comez and McLaren's study, secure attachment with mother and father have negative correlations with aggression levels. (in late adolescence 18-20) (Gomez and McLaren, 2007). Another study reveals that secure attachment has correlation with prosocial (in favor of society) orientation/behavior (Marcus and Kramer, 2001).

2011 study of Chen, Coccaro, Lee, and Jacobson found a positive significant relationship between childhood traumas and adult aggression ($p < .001$) (Chen *et al.*, 2011).

Zhu, Chen, and Xia's 2020 study, similar to this study, has been conducted with undergraduate students and using the CTQ and the BPAQ, and the mediator variable was "hostile attribution bias" (evaluating others' behavior as hostile rather than as benign and harmless). The study also found a significant relationship between the two scales with the relation of this mediator variable in a sample from a different culture than the sample in this study. (Zhu *et al.*, 2020).

Another study with a sample consists of Greek university students reveals that there is a significant difference between participants who experienced childhood trauma and others. This study examines hostility and aggression separately and there are significant differences between groups according to both variables. Aggression and trauma relation still remains also in Greek university student sample (Dragioti *et al.*, 2012). In Western Herzegovina Canton study consists of young students; reveals correlation between childhood trauma consists of physical, emotional abuse, neglect or witnessing violence, and aggression, rule-breaking problems and other social problems (Sesar *et al.*, 2008).

It can be deduced from all these instances that the findings of the current research are coherent with the literature. Childhood traumatic experiences are predictive on aggression for young adults as well as different age groups and cultural groups.

Most of the studies in literature conducted with juveniles also spot the childhood experiences and it is obvious that the ratio of childhood maltreatment among juveniles is high. These studies emerged the importance of “cycle of violence” researches. Hovee and peers have used this term and conducted research with juveniles and evaluate the relationship between childhood maltreatment and future violence predisposition. In this study, it is reminded that according to literature there is a relationship between aggression and trauma in both women and men samples, but aggression is significantly higher in men. The study has conducted with 767 boys and according to correlation analysis, there was a positive significant correlation between aggression and childhood traumas. The study also notes that aggressive behavior and trauma are also related to mental health issues according to correlational analysis and common among juveniles (Hoeve *et al.*, 2015). Another study by Sarchiapone, Carli, Cuomo, Marchetti, and Roy, 2007, conducted with men in prison and used Childhood Trauma Questionnaire and Brown Goodwin Aggression Scale, has revealed the positive significant relationship between these two scales and showed that childhood traumas can be a predictor of aggression (Sarchiapone *et al.*, 2009). In a research which has participants consist of offenders, many offenders reported traumatic events such as parental adversities (substance use, neglect etc.) and violence and abuse in family except 11% of participants (Wallinius *et al.*, 2016). All of these results demonstrate the reality which is consistent with hypothesis: violence passed down from generation to generation in a cycle and is not only an individual but a social problem. Also, according to Berg and Felson’s studies offenders have more tendency to be victims because engaging more *verbal disputes* and honor related attitudes. According to offenders’ beliefs and cultural conduct, choosing violent behavior as a coping method against disputes to “defend honor”. Alcohol abuse and low self-control are other risk factors (Felson *et al.*, 2018)

As a result of the chi-square analysis conducted in the study, it has been found that there is a significant difference between the female and male participants in terms of scores obtained from the BPAQ, and no significant difference has been found in the trauma scale scores. Results are consistent with the literature.

In the literature, cross-gender studies find place frequently and besides the many similarities between genders, some differences are also mentioned. One of these differences is physical aggression levels. Most of the studies claim that the aggression levels of men are significantly higher than women (Archer, 2004). Some of the studies that have been carried out with Turkish young student samples reveal that theory. One study has been carried out with 851 Turkish university students, claimed that gender (being male) is one of the significant predictors of aggression (Odacı and Çelik, 2020). Another study that has been carried out with students by Avcı claims that theory too. According to this study, the aggression perception of male students is significantly higher than female. (Avcı, 2010). In a study carried out by Derman, it has been found that male students behaved more aggressively than girls, with a sample of 3199 students aged 10-11 (4th and 5th grade) attending 10 different schools in Bursa from different socioeconomic levels. (Derman, 2011) These researches which have been conducted with children, adolescents and young adults from different education levels (bachelor degree or under) and from different socioeconomic levels are remarkable because of revealing that aggression and gender relation still remains in different socioeconomic, educational and cultural factors. In a study that has focused sexual crimes, correlation analysis has revealed that there is a significant correlation between childhood adversity and sexual violence, and also this study examines the gender differences. According to results, men are more likely to be a part of a sexual crime and more likely to use force and weapons (Levenson and Grady, 2016). In Eren's

study, the 1-year prevalence of aggressive behavior in people without any psychological disorder was stated as 2.74% in men and 1.11% in women. In a study conducted among outpatients, this rate increases even more and it is seen that the rate of showing aggressive behavior is 4.26% in men and 1.40% in women. As a result, scientific data reveal that men display more aggressive behaviors than women. (Eren, 2009). It is also noteworthy that in the current study, aggression levels are significantly higher in male sample although there is no significant differences between childhood trauma scores. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be interpreted as the men becoming more aggressive because they are exposed to more violence. In accordance with the literature male participants revealed more aggressiveness and this result can be interpreted by gender and cultural issues beside biological issues. Gender and culture also point out social learning and role modeling. Victim or witness of the violence might lose his/her belief in the fairness of the world (Strauss, 1990) and after that male identify himself with physically powerful perpetrator (Mihalic and Elliot, 1997) mostly father.

As a result of the evaluation of the findings and the literature, the effects of violence and abuse experienced in the family in childhood, not only in childhood but also throughout life, have emerged as a clearer problem. The importance of the studies that examine the lifelong effects of domestic violence and developmental traumas experienced during childhood and its relationship with many different attitudes in adulthood is obvious.

4.1. Limitations

There are few limitations of the study such as the limited number of participants who receive language education or a limited number of male participants due to lacking the language students and male students in the selected university. In addition, the inclusion of psychology students who are highly aware of violence, aggression and psychological traumas may have created a limitation.

5. Conclusion

In accordance with the intergenerational transmission model and social learning theory, it has been observed that traumas and domestic violence experienced in childhood are related not only to childhood and adolescence but also to aggression in young adulthood between the ages of 18-25. The importance of longitudinal studies, which will show the effects of the concept of domestic violence on lifelong development, is obvious. Similar studies should be carried out with larger samples that will reveal stronger relationships with different age groups, people from different socioeconomic conditions. The relationship between violence and gender should also be emphasized.

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