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THE QUALITY OF PEER RELATIONS IN A SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: FROM INDIFFERENCE TO MUTUAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

The quality of peer relationships is one of the traditional issues of social psychology. Extensive knowledge of this area enables us to deeper the understanding of different types of conflicts among peers, but does not allow their effective prevention. This research sought to investigate the students' perception of peer relation and estimate behavioral tendency related to the psychological theory. The article is based on the humanistic conception of students' support as well as the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), the BIAS Map (Fiske et al., 2002; 2007) and the Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan, 2002). To measure the aspects of the quality of peer relations, three questionnaire were used: the Semantic Differential Technique 'Typical Peer' (A. Itendo-Milewska, 2007), the Data Sheet to evaluate the behavioral tendency and to recognize the emotion (A. Itendo-Milewska, 2013), and the Scale of Social Support by Roman Cieślak (1995) to measure the mutual support in students' perception. The results present two main themes in the field of the quality of peer relation: (1) the students in the 1st grade experienced unpleasant emotions towards a typical peer and they perceived 'a typical peer' as less competent than students in the 3nd grade, (2) in the area of currently received support, the group of 1st grade students significantly more often declares that a typical peer did not show the understanding for

the school situation. The results help understand that the intervention programs should be implemented in order to shape the deeper level of peer relation in the school environment.

Keywords

School, School Environment, Peer Relation, Emotion, Conventional and Dysfunctional Behavior

1. Introduction

The subject of peer relations is one of the traditional topics of social psychology. Broad knowledge of that field enables us to understand better and provides us with more efficient solution to resolve all sorts of conflicts and tensions among peers. It also helps to prevent isolation and rejection of children, although, it does not enable us to effectively prevent hence requires further systematic research, analysis, honest diagnosis of the field of quality of peer relations performed at every stage of child development in all types of schools. Based on the subject literature a premise was formulated that the peer relations constitute a background to an adolescent's development in all their aspects, that they are not the goal of the young people growth but provide environment for a proper development (Poleszak, 2004). Establishing and upholding satisfactory peer relation is crucial for a proper growth of students. These include joining a peer group with a socially valid lifestyle, peer support and control, socially acceptable peer hobbies or positive peer pressure (Gaś, 2004).

The scientific problem of this paper, related to the peer-relation qualities as well as behavioral tendencies towards a typical peer, requires intergroup risk theory reference. The way we perceive social groups is described by the *Stereotype Content Model* SCM as well as *BIAS Map model* (Behaviors from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes Map) (Fiske and others, 2002) provided that the given individual/group is placed onto two-dimensional space: competence and good will.

Based on theoretical consideration as well as on a need of a deep recognition of peer relation quality in the school environment there was created a cognitive goal of this paper. The goal is to recognize and analysis of the peer relation quality. The solid diagnosis of these should be of help to teachers, school management as well as to parents in preventing of spreading risky behavior in a group.

2. Theoretical Background

Models that are of interest to us relate to typical terminology in the area of school environment and peer relations such as: school environment, peer relations, emotions, dysfunctional behavior. School environment constitutes all of the factors, institutional, personal and didactical that are in school. The existence and quality of relation of a student with important

people, both teachers and students are an indicator of a better evaluation of how the student functions in a school environment (Gryniuk, Tuszyńska-Bogucka, 2004). The peer relations do not constitute the goal of a teenager development but create condition for a proper growth in all the areas: psychological, physical, social and spiritual. In some of the areas they are of crucial importance (Poleszak, 2004). Emotions are the short, complex adaptive reactions (consisting of a number of components – physiological, cognitive, subjective, expressive, motivational and triggering a great many processes) to a given situation and events (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Niedenthal et al., 2006).

Dysfunctional behaviors are those who are against social expectations, norms and standards for sex and age and they endanger health and they are associated with difficulties in assuming social roles. Psychologist (Jessor, 1977, 1992; Lindsay, 1983; Gaś, 2004) suggest to consider them as an element of a teenager development that plays a crucial role in becoming an adult.

Talking of theoretical framework of the peer relations should be commenced with focus on development norms and patterns in adolescence, the key period in the growth of personality as well as in realizing life goals. At this stage occurs a transition from an external obligations expressed in the forms of rules of behavior and instructions into internal obligations i.e. a system of needs moral principles, motives perceived by an individual as an internal necessity to behave in a certain way (Jessor, 1977; Hefnawi, 2017). An important aspect of the adolescence period is decreasing dependability on family expressed, among others, in the area of interpersonal relations with peers. It should also be said that in the period of adolescence a person starts to discover a rich world of emotions and thoughts as well as realizing one's independence and ingenuity. Young people adopt then all sorts of convictions, attitudes, opinions, language or dress code from a surrounding society. The peer group has a special role to play in shaping the identity written about by E.H. Erikson (Mesarosova, 2017). The peer group sets standards of behavior, provides safety and creates an opportunity to develop social competences as well as provides an environment to accept examples and follow them (Harwas-Napierała, Trempała, 2005, p. 183). In the adolescence period a need to be recognized and accepted comes into prominence more than ever before. Being accepted by the peer group provides a social status and popularity of a big group that in turn gives a sense of belonging (Brown, Lohr, 1987) and formed friendships that provide a sense of safety, respect, sympathy and recognition have a direct impact on reducing the sense of loneliness (Bukowski, Hoza, Boivin, 1993).

In such a way, adolescence becomes the time when the friendships are formed and one becomes a member of a peer group. This kind of social connection provides young people with

important psychological benefits, such as sense of trust, acceptance and friendship (Turner, Helms, 1999, p. 362). Young people undertake actions to form closer acquaintances, built small social groups and when it comes to a conflict and threat situation various reactions are explained by an *Intergroup Threat Theory* (Stephan, 2002) which says that tendencies of a human behavior should be analysed first of all as a cognitive reaction, then emotional one and then behavioral.

Various factors associated with a human reaction to a threat. Cognitive reactions to a threat by other people belonging to another group could influence the shift in perceiving perception of the other group as a stereotype change, intolerance or hatred (Shamir, Sagiv-Schifter, 2006), changes in perception of the other group behavior (Costarelli, 2005); perception of homogeneity of the other group (Rothberber, 1997) and increased probability of perceiving the danger associated with unpleasant emotions i.e. anger towards others (Maner et al., 2005). For instance, existing threat could increase a risk of attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979) when inappropriate other group actions (and appropriate one's own group actions) are explained in categories of their members features, while the opposite situation is associated with to a situation.

Emotional reactions to a threat will probably be unpleasant ones: fear, anxiety, anger and indignation (Davis, Stephan, 2006), contempt, disgust (Mackie, Devos & Smith, 2000) and anger, hatred, humiliation, fear, helplessness, despair and indignation.

Behavioral reactions in response to a number of threats manifest in withdrawal, submission and negotiation in an aggressive situation (direct or indirect one), lying, cheating, stealing, revenge and other forms of conflict. Evaluation of responses to a threat should be recognized by the fact whether the threat is considered aimed at a group or at individual members of a given group. In other words they can be considered on both individual and group level. When the threats are directed at particular group members they cause emotions concerning with self-care (i.e. personal safety, positive self-esteem) such as fear and sensitivity, vulnerability to harm. When, on the other hand, the threats are directed at a group as a whole they invoke emotions associated with the wellbeing of the group (its resources or reputation) such as anger, remorse or collective sense of guilt. In both cases the purposes and behaviors could vary. They mostly depend on the evaluation of individual/or collective potential to react to a situation (Stephen, Renfro, 2002). People, then, react to threats in various ways. Their cognitive reactions will probably hinder their logical thinking and their emotional reactions, which can be unpleasant could influence their behavioral reactions to existing danger. For instance, fear lead often to escape when we are alone and feel weak but it can, as well, lead to an attack if we are in a group or we can count on the strength of the group. So the cohesion of the group, a degree of

identification with it as well as individual dispositions can condition our reaction to a threat from others.

There is another assumption in theory of intergroup threat that says that among general images that can be derived from various configuration of intergroup relation evaluation the five of them are recognized as particularly important in international affairs. They were defined as an image of 'enemy', an image of 'ally', an image of 'barbarian', *dependent (colonist)*, 'imperialist' (Hermann, Fischerkeller, 1995).

This model was introduced to theoretical study associated with the quality of relation between students in middle school due to a possibility of evaluation of behavioral tendencies and/or reactions to a typical peer as well as identification of emotions ascribed to a group of students on different class level (class I and III). Taking into consideration the above theoretical assumption a creation of a research program aimed to recognize emotions/feelings experienced in relation to a typical peer and to identify behavioral tendencies toward one. In the course of further considerations it will be attempted to present how the group of students of classes I and III perceives the image of a group according to this model.

Similar aspects of evaluation of intergroup relations (i.e. status and group aims) are pointed by *Stereotype Content Model* and *BIAS Map model (Behaviors from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes Map)* (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002) which is a further development of that model. Both assume an existence of two dimensions, by which the individuals/groups are perceived: competency (i.e. independent, able, self-confident, talented, features associated with abilities and skills) and *generosity* (i.e. amiable, reliable, honest, friendly, features associated with motivation and intentions). Identified, after a long research, (Rosenbert, Nelson & Vivekananthan, 1968) and labeled by various terms (i.e. value and dynamism: Osgood, 1962) social positivity/negativity or intellectual positivity/negativity (Rosenberg, Sedlack, 1972), self-advantage and advantage for others (Peeters, 1972) morality and competence (Wojciszke, 1994), efficacy and social desire (Dubois, Beauvois, 2008) etc. The special no. of *European Journal of Social Psychology* published in December 2008 ed. By Abele, Cuddy, Judd and Yzerbyt presents the most recent research related to the two dimensions of social perception which are vital to both evaluation and anticipation of our relations with others.

Placing the group in this two-dimensional space determines perception of social structure of relation between groups, especially the status and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002). Why the two dimensions? Deeply rooted in this wide research stereotype content model (SCM) postulates that perception of a group/individual status leads to their perception through a stereotype of competence while perceived lack of competence determines perception of an

individual/group in '*generous*' categories. S. Fiske also postulates a hypothesis that individuals/group other than ours will be perceived as competent if they are seen as strong and having high status or incompetent when seen as helpless and having low status and that specific emotions between the groups: contempt, envy, remorse or pride will accompany each combination in evaluation of competence of '*generosity*' (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2002).

The above assumptions led to formulating four categories of a group and corresponding emotional attitudes. To individuals/groups having high status i.e. highly set in the area of competence correspond two types of emotional attitude depending on their generosity evaluation:

- Individuals/groups that are competent and evaluated as generous (usually close to an affiliation group or perceived as its ally) evoke recognition, admiration or pride;
- Individuals/groups that are competent but evaluated as non-generous (perceived as competition) evoke envy and ambivalent emotions (their high competence evokes admiration but at the same time because of the fear of competition evoke envy).

Individuals/groups having low status, placed low in the competence dimension have also two types of attitude in relation to the evaluation of their generosity:

- Individuals/groups with a little competence but perceived as generous (non-competitive) evoke paternalistic attitude so ambivalent as well because on one hand it is caused by affection on the other by pity;
- Individuals/groups with a little competence but perceived as not very generous evoke contempt and, at times, even repulsion or anger.

The BIAS Map model (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2007) associates the generosity dimension with *active* behaviors (both with active help as well as with active harm) and the competence dimension with '*passive*' ones (passive help and passive harm). The four type of behaviors in relation to other groups resulting from it are as follows:

- Active help (engagement in acts of open support for a group or its protection),
- Active harm (engagement in an open hostility or acts of harm),
- Passive help (declared willingness for cooperation, establishing relations),
- Passive harm (declared willingness for rejection, humiliation of the group).

As the results of some research, concerning perception of groups with low status and competence, show (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Su, 2002) evaluation of their amiability and emotional attitude depend mostly on how their ability to manage with difficulties and reason of having ones. Contempt is often directed at groups that are believed to have the difficulties due to their own actions or/and groups that are believed to be able to overcome them but not trying hard

enough. Pity is, however, shown toward groups perceived that are having problems not resulting from their actions and/or not having the ability to overcome them. The former are seen as not requiring any help or even not deserving one the later to the contrary.

Using this model for the theoretical consideration related to peer relation quality it is worth stressing that dimensions presented in this model are vital for both evaluation as well as for anticipation our relation with others. They will allow to determine if the picture of peer relation remains in the dimension of *amiability* or *competence* thus whether it is related to *active behaviors* – both with helping and hurting or with *passive behavior* undertaken by peers. It is of vital importance to know whether we are dealing with a person or a group that has friendly or antagonistic attitude and whether a person or a group is able to help us or to hurt us. It could prove crucial in peer relations and in polish literature, so far, we have not found research based on these models.

3. Research Issue

The problem stated in this paper is formulated in a form of a question: What is the quality of peer relations among middle school students? The problem formulated in such terms requires to consider the qualities of peer relations in the dimensions: the image of a typical peer among students, emotions associated with such, behaviors associated and the type of support received from a peer or need for support as well as looking for such support.

Attempting to recognize the opinion of middle school student about their *image of a typical peer, declared emotions toward a typical peer, the average value of declared behaviors/reactions toward a typical peer and an average evaluation of social support given by a typical peer* a zero hypothesis was formulated: I assume that the average value of opinion expressed about a typical peer among the group of students from classes I and classes III does not differ. The alternate hypothesis is contrary to the zero hypothesis.

4. Methodology

The research was conducted in March and April of 2012 among 120 randomly chosen students of the Public Middle School in Białystok. The selection of a trial group was level oriented where the levels were classes: three first classes of students starting their education in middle school (13 years old) and three third classes completing their education (16 years old).

The students filled, created by the authors, semantic differential '*Typical peer*' and '*The Scale of Social Support SWS 8 by Roman Cieślak*'. The students also received *research form containing the list of experienced emotions associated with a typical peer* (in accordance with

Stereotype Content Model SCM and BIAS Map Model). The form also contained a list of different possible reactions towards a typical peer (according to Theory of intergroup threat).

The schematic of methodological aids contains the following elements.

Table 1: Methodological Aids

Methodological Aids	
Independent variables	Dependent variables
<p>1. The Image of a typical peer <i>Research tool:</i> Semantic Differential 'Typical peer' <i>Theory:</i> Counselling Theory by L. M. Brammer (1984) adapted by Zb. B. Gaś (2004)</p>	Perception of middle school students in the area of students' declaration describing from 'the lowest level' to 'very highest level'
<p>2. Emotions experienced by a typical peer <i>Research tool:</i> List of experienced emotions associated with a typical peer <i>Theory:</i> Stereotype Content Model and BIAS Map (Fiske, 2002)</p>	
<p>3. Declared behaviors/reactions toward a typical peer <i>Research tool:</i> List of different possible reactions towards a typical peer <i>Theory:</i> Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan, 2002) Theory of Intergroup Threat (Hermann, Fischerkeller, 1995)</p>	
<p>4. A type of support <i>Research tool:</i> The Scale of Social Support SWS 8 by Roman Cieślak' <i>Theory:</i> Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1993)</p>	

Source: Own research

The statistical analysis was done using a T-Student test for two independent groups. The relevance level was determined on the 0,05 level. The analysis was done using the SPSS Statistics 17.0 software. The calculations done with a T-Student test require presenting the average data and standard deviations, latitude degree and validity.

5. Analysis

The analysis of our research will be based on selected data, which will be used to describe quality of peer relations. We commence our considerations with presenting data gathered using semantic differential filled by students. Giving their answers their task was to mark on a 5-point scale (from 5 – very to 1 – little) how they perceive a *typical peer*.

Data from table no. 2 concerning a typical peer in perception of middle school students show that 50.0 % of young people declare that a typical peer is very *sociable*, moderately: *competent* (35.8%), *understands me* (38.3%), *interested in me* (28.3%) and *conscientious* (33.3%). A typical peer is also *indifferent* (31.6% answers “not at all” and 25.8% answers “almost none” not-indifferent).

Comparing the answers of students of particular classes in the dimension *sociable* there can be seen a tendency pointing that the students of class I perceive a typical peer as average *sociable* (43.3%) when in older classes a typical peer is *very sociable* (in class III 65.0%). In the

category *sociable* there are important differences between the group of class I and the group of class III ($t = -3.069$; $p < 0.05$) showing that the group of class III more often declares that a typical peer is sociable.

In the category *competent* students of class I declare that a typical peer is neither competent nor non-competent (this answer “neither nor” declare 40.0% of students), while students of class III declare that a typical peer is of average competence (38.3% among students of class III).

Tendencies in the category *conscientious* and *interested in me* seem to be similar. Students of class I declare that a typical peer is neither conscientious nor non-conscientious (35.0%); similarly neither is *interested in me* nor *not interested in me* (35.0%). The students of class III, however, declare that a typical peer is average *competent* and *interested in me*.

Table 2: The image of a typical peer

Typical peer	Answers	I class students		III class students		Total		Comparisons between groups		
		N=60	%	N=60	%	N=120	%	t	df	p.i.
Sociable	very	21	35.0	39	65.0	60	50.0	-3.069	118	0.003
	average	26	43.3	15	25.0	41	34.16			
	Neither nor	5	8.3	3	5.0	8	6.66			
	Almost non	6	10.0	3	5.0	9	7.5			
	little	2	3.3	0	0	2	1.66			
Average		3.968		4.500		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.0730		.8130		-	-			
Competent	very	8	1.3	9	15.0	17	14.16	.447	118	0.656
	average	20	33.3	23	38.3	43	35.83			
	Neither nor	24	40.0	13	21.7	37	30.83			
	Almost non	8	13.3	13	21.7	21	17.5			
	little	0	0	1	1.7	2	1.66			
Average		3.467		3.383		-	-			
Standard deviation		.8919		1.1363		-	-			
Understands me	very	9	15.0	18	30.0	27	22.5	-1.348	118	0.180
	average	22	36.7	24	40.0	46	38.33			
	Neither nor	14	23.3	4	6.7	18	15.0			
	Almost non	12	20.0	8	13.3	20	16.66			
	little	3	5.0	6	10.0	9	7.5			
Average		3.367		3.667		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.1194		1.3105		-	-			
Interested in me	very	7	11.7	13	21.7	20	16.66	-1.429	118	0.156
	average	15	25.0	19	31.7	34	28.33			
	Neither nor	21	35.0	10	16.7	31	25.83			
	Almost non	6	10.0	12	20.0	20	16.66			
	little	11	18.3	6	10.0	17	14.16			
Average		3.017		3.350		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.2554		1.2996		-	-			
Non-indifferent	very	9	15.0	7	11.7	16	13.33	-.842	118	0.402
	average	6	10.0	16	26.7	22	18.33			
	Neither nor	19	31.7	19	31.7	38	31.66			
	Almost non	21	35.0	10	16.7	31	25.83			
	little	5	8.3	8	13.3	13	10.83			
Average		2.883		3.067		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.1802		1.2054		-	-			
Conscientious	very	14	23.3	16	26.7	30	25.0	-1.68	118	0.867

	average	18	30.0	22	36.7	40	33.33			
	Neither nor	21	35.0	11	18.3	32	26.66			
	Almost non	6	10.0	8	13.3	14	11.66			
	little	1	1.7	3	5.0	4	3.33			
Average		3.633		3.667		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.0079		1.1596		-	-			
Amiable	very	13	21.7	15	25.0	28	23.33			
	average	37	61.7	40	66.7	77	64.16			
	Neither nor	7	11.7	2	3.3	9	7.5			
	Almost non	1	1.7	2	3.3	3	2.5			
	little	2	3.3	1	1.7	3	2.5			
Average		3.967		4.100		-	-			
Standard deviation		.8431		.7524		-	-			
								-914	118	0.363

Source: Own research

Presenting a middle school student of the first and the third class opinion concerning a typical peer image there are no grounds to reject the formulated zero hypothesis that an average opinion about a typical peer among students from the first and the third class is not very different in dimension of *competent*, *understands me*, *interested in me*, *non-indifferent*, *conscientious*, *amiable*. The zero hypothesis should be rejected and the alternative one should be accepted in a dimension *sociable* – an average value of opinion presented concerning a typical peer in the researched groups differs significantly statistically in the dimension *sociable*.

Summarizing the analysis of the results, it can be stated that a typical peer is rather *competent* (after accumulating close categories *very* and *average*), keeping in mind that students of the third class perceive a typical peer as more competent than the students of the first class (46.6% answers from the first class and 53.3% answers from the students of the third class) and *rather amiable* in opinion of both the first and the third class students (after cumulation of close categories *very* and *average*). As for Stereotype Content Model S. Fiske (Fiske, Cuddy & Glick, 2002) who stresses that individuals/groups of identity perceived as competent and amiable evoke recognition, admiration or pride – it is worth noticing that the image of a typical peer among students of the third classes is a peer that evokes both recognition as well as envy while among students of the first classes – either compassion or anger. The summary of the results of the research in relation to the theory is presented in the table number 3.

Table 3: Model BIAS MAP: summary of the research results

Group tested	Dimension: Competence-warmth	Emotions	Behavior types
I class students	Less competent More warmth	Compassion pity	Active facilitation or passive impediment
III class students	More competent More warmth	Pride Ambivalent feelings	Passive facilitation or active impediment

Source: Own research

Further analysis of the research results based on theoretical basis of stereotype content model (SCM) and BIAS Map Model reveals that the students of the first class perceive a peer as *less competent* but *more amiable* and feel toward such a person *compassion* what allows to assume that their tendencies of behavior will remain in the category *active facilitation* (participating in help action or protection of a group) or *passive impediment*. The students of the third class perceive a peer as *more competent* and *more amiable* and feel *recognition* but also have ambivalent emotions what suggest that their behavioral tendencies will remain in a category either *passive facilitation* (declared willingness to cooperation, establishing relations) or *active facilitation* (participation in helping or protection of a group). It might be worthwhile to extend the issue and incorporate an attempt to establish status of power and an analysis of individuals/groups' goals.

The image of a typical peer as perceived by a middle school student should be augmented with the research of undertaken actions/reactions towards a typical peer. The following table presents opposite answers given by the students: *not at all* and *I am very likely*.

Table 4: Reactions to a typical peer by middle school students

To what extent are you willing to:	Answers	I class students		III class students		Total		Comparisons between groups		
		N=60	%	N=60	%	N=120	%	t	df	p.i.
Undertake actions in order to avoid contact with peers	the least	26	43.3	19	31.7	45	37.5			
	the most	3	5.0	4	6.7	7	5.83			
Average		2.73		3.05		-	-	-0.769	118	0.444
Standard deviation		2.201		2.310		-	-			
Learn self-defence techniques in order to defend yourself against peers	the least	9	15.0	15	25.0	24	20.0			
	the most	12	20.0	8	13.3	20	16.6			
Average		5.03		4.03		-	-	1.92	118	0.056
Standard deviation		2.810		2.876		-	-			
Not to participate in school tasks/projects involving cooperation with peers	the least	17	28.3	20	3.3	37	30.83			
	the most	4	6.7	3	5.0	7	5.83			
Average		3.48		3.13		-	-	.813	118	0.418
Standard deviation		2.432		2.281		-	-			
Delegate to a peer an important task in a project coordinated by a teacher	the least	5	8.3	5	8.3	10	8.33			
	the most	6	10.0	13	21.7	19	15.83			
Average		4.78		5.30		-	-	-1.14	118	0.255
Standard deviation		2.344		2.599		-	-			
Cross to the other side of corridor when seeing approaching peer	the least	20	33.3	27	45.0	47	39.16			
	the most	8	13.3	5	8.3	13	10.83			
Average		4.00		3.20		-	-	1.54	118	0.800

Standard deviation		2.929		2.736		-	-			
Take an effort to befriend peers	the least	4	6.7	2	3.3	6	5.0	-.509	118	0.612
	the most	20	33.3	15	25.0	35	29.16			
Average		6.42		6.63		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.486		2.170		-	-			
Take an effort to perform socially valid tasks in cooperation with peers	the least	4	6.7	12	20.0	16	13.3	.574	118	0.567
	the most	6	10.0	4	6.7	10	8.33			
Average		4.83		4.58		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.279		2.486		-	-			

Source: Own research

The research shows that 37.5% of students declare that they *do not undertake an effort* to avoid interaction with peers 20.0% declare that they *would not learn self-defence techniques* in order to defend themselves against peers; 16.6% declare to be ready for such effort; 30.8% declare that they *would undertake school tasks/project involving cooperation with other students*, 15.8% declare *readiness to delegate important project tasks to a peer* in a project coordinated by a teacher, 39.1% of students declare that *they do not move to the other side of corridor seeing an approaching peer*; 29.1% students are ready to *take an effort to befriend a peer*, 13.3% of students would not try to take part in social work at school with a peer and 8.3% would do it.

In all presented areas of behavior there did not occur statistically important differences between classes. Looking at the opinions of middle school students in this particular area there are no grounds to reject the formulated zero hypothesis that the average value of declared behaviors/reactions toward a typical peer among the students of the first and the third classes does not differ. The further research could be directed and deeper recognition of the students opinion in the area of behaviors associated with defending themselves against peers.

In the context of *intergroup threat theory* (Stephan, 2002) *behavioral reactions* associated with the experienced threats can take a form of e.g. withdrawal, submission and negotiations in the situation of violence (direct or indirect), lying, theft, revenge or other forms and can take various forms depending on whether the threat is perceived as aimed at a group or the particular members of that group. When the threat is aimed at the particular members of a group it evokes emotions associated with self-care (personal safety, positive image of oneself) such as fear and vulnerability to harm. When, however, the threat is aimed at a group as a whole it evokes emotions associated with a care for a good of the group (e.g. its resources or reputation) such as anger, regret or a collective guilt. In both cases the aims and behaviors taken could be different. Them mostly depend on the evaluation of individual and/or collective potential for and adequate reaction to those situations (Stephen, Renfro, 2002). So, people react to threats in many different ways. The results of the research tend to show that the average answers given by students of the

first class, in the area associated with learning self-defence techniques to protect oneself against peers is higher than among students of the third class, similarly as the average of the answers of the first class students in relation to a behavior of *crossing to the other side of corridor when seeing an approaching peer, not to participate school task/project together with other peers*. Behavioral tendencies of the first class students can focus around passive impediment towards their peers at middle school students.

The first class students can, then, undertake active behaviors to protect themselves in a threat situation (Table no. 3 BIAS MAP Model: summary of research) or passive behavior (in the context of *intergroup threat theory*; Stephan, 2002). These results seem to be interesting and require further in-depth studies in this area.

The next step in the research was, thus, recognition of emotions that are most often experienced toward a typical peer. The following Table no. 6 presents data in this area. Its analysis shows that 34.16% of students feel no *sadness* when thinking about a typical peer, does not feel *anger* (21.66%), *shame* (30.0%), *pride* (16.66%), *admiration* (18.3%), *confusion* (25.83%), *envy* (39.16%) nor *fear* 50.0%). On the other hand they strongly feel *joy* (17.5%), *affinity* (12.5%). *Curiosity* toward a typical peer is an emotion that the middle school students feel both 'very strong' or 'not at all'.

Table 5: *The most often experience emotions toward a typical peer*

Emotions / feelings	answer	I class students		III class students		Total		Comparisons between groups		
		N=60	%	N=60	%	N=120	%	t	df	p.i.
Sadness	not at all	20	33.3	21	35.0	41	34.16	.579	118	0.564
	very strongly	1	1.7	2	3.3	3	2.50			
Average		2.98		2.77		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.063		2.037		-	-			
Joy	not at all	3	5.0	2	3.3	5	4.16			
	very strongly	12	20.0	9	15.0	21	17.5			
Average		6.17		6.32		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.323		2.021		-	-			
Anger	not at all	13	21.7	13	21.7	26	21.66	.872	118	0.385
	very strongly	5	8.3	3	5.0	8	6.66			
Average		3.82		3.43		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.514		2.295		-	-			
Liking	not at all	8	13.3	2	3.3	10	8.33			
	very strongly	9	15.0	6	10.0	15	12.5			
Average		5,65		5,53		-	-			
Standard deviation		2,705		2,087		-	-			
Shame	not at all	17	28.3	19	31.7	36	30.0	.117	118	0.907

	very strongly	2	3.3	3	5.0	5	4.16			
Average		3.40		3.35		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.219		2.462		-	-			
Pride	not at all	10	16.7	10	16.7	20	16.66	.592	118	0.555
	very strongly	8	13.3	4	6.7	12	10.0			
Average		4.70		4.43		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.566		2.360		-	-			
Confusion	not at all	12	20.0	19	31.7	31	25.83	1.527	118	0.129
	very strongly	4	6.7	3	5.0	7	5.83			
Average		3.80		3.13		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.427		2.354		-	-			
Envy	not at all	26	43.3	21	35.0	47	39.16	1.246	118	0.215
	very strongly	5	8.3	2	3.3	7	5.83			
Average		3.22		2.67		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.756		2.022		-	-			
Fear	not at all	25	41.7	35	58.3	60	50.0	1.735	118	0.085
	very strongly	2	3.3	2	3.3	4	33.33			
Average		2.68		2.08		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.135		1.619		-	-			
Curiosity	not at all	3	5.0	5	8.3	8	6.66	1.064	118	0.290
	very strongly	4	6.7	6	10.0	10	8.33			
Average		5.42		4.98		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.077		2.376		-	-			
Admiration	not at all	11	18.3	11	18.3	22	18.33	.327	118	0.744
	very strongly	4	6.7	4	6.7	8	6.66			
Average		4.45		4.30		-	-			
Standard deviation		2.514		2.513		-	-			

Source: Own research

Analysing the research taking into account the particular groups it should be noted that the first class students more often than those of the third class strongly feel *anger*, *pride*, *envy* while the third class students more often feel *joy* and they do not feel *fear*.

The average of given answers shows that the first class students more often experience unpleasant emotions toward a typical peer than the third class students. The results, however, are not statistically relevant so the zero hypothesis should be accepted: I assume that the average value of declared emotions toward a typical peer does not differ between students of the first and the third class. Placing the research in the frame of reference of theories presented in the first part of the paper it should be noted that more frequent experiencing of unpleasant feelings toward a

typical peer by the first class students can be related to behavioral reactions of these students to a threat from another peer – they can display tendencies to undertake active or passive actions in a violent situation to rather protect themselves rather than the group in which they function.

In the context of an intergroup threat theory (Stephan, 2002) we should relate to aforementioned *Model of emotion evaluation in relation to five specific configurations*.

Table 6: *Model of emotion evaluation in relation to five specific configurations*

Researchers	Relation elements	<i>Emotions and feelings</i>	<i>behavioral tendencies</i>	<i>Image</i>
Class I students	Goal independence Low status Low power	Anger Compassion	Exploration Paternalism	Dependent
Clas III students	<i>Goal independence</i> <i>High status</i> <i>High power</i>	Envy Ambivalence Recognition	Resistance Rebellion	Imperialists

Source: Own research

It turns out that the first class students experience unpleasant emotions towards a typical peer (e.g. anger, contempt) more frequently and perceive one as less competent. It seems then that they would tend to display *dependent* behavioral tendencies in relation to middle school peers. *Not participating in school task involving cooperation with peers*, they tend to establish relations based on a principle that involve dependence of one party what is confirmed by maintaining the image of their group as *dependant*. The third class students, on the other hand, experience pleasant or ambivalent emotions more frequently toward a typical peer (competence of a typical peer evoke recognition, joy but also – due to fear of competition – envy). Moreover, they perceive a typical peer competent more frequently so it seems that they would display behavioral tendencies in a form of resistance or rebellion.

According to *intergroup threat theory* when the group resources are perceived as low, emotions that are evoked are resentment, contempt and the group is seen as *dependent*. This theory claims that configuration of experiencing pleasant emotions such as admiration and trust but also envy is associated with perception of a typical peer by third class students as an “*imperialist*”.

I compared the results of the research with those in the area of peer support. Only the results in the area of statistically relevant differences will be presented.

Table 7: Evaluation of social support provided by a typical peer at school

Typical peer	Answers	Class I		Class III		Total		Intergroup comparison		
		N=60	%	N=60	%	N=120	%	t	df	p.i.
There are people who really like me	1	5	8.3	0	0	5	4.16	-3.093	118	0.002
	2	8	13.3	4	6.7	12	10.0			
	3	22	36.7	18	30.0	40	33.33			
	4	25	41.7	38	63.3	63	52.5			
Average		3.117		3.567		-	-			
Standard deviation		.9405		.6207		-	-			
I know people I can always count on	1	7	11.7	0	0	7	5.83	-3.428	118	0.001
	2	12	20.0	8	13.3	20	16.66			
	3	15	25.0	10	16.7	25	20.83			
	4	26	43.3	42	70.0	68	30.90			
Average		3.000		3.567		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.0577		.7217		-	-			
When I am worried there is someone who would help me	1	6	10.0	2	3.3	8	6.66	-2.628	118	0.010
	2	12	20.0	8	13.3	20	16.66			
	3	23	38.3	17	28.3	40	33.33			
	4	19	31.7	33	55.0	52	43.33			
Average		2.917		3.350		-	-			
Standard deviation		.9618		.8402		-	-			
There are people who offer me help when I need it	1	7	11.7	0	0	7	5.83	-2.033	118	0.044
	2	13	21.7	11	18.3	24	20.0			
	3	12	20.0	16	26.7	28	23.33			
	4	28	46.7	33	55.0	61	50.83			
Average		3.017		3.367		-	-			
Standard deviation		1.0813		.7804		-	-			
Whenever I am down there are people who cheer me up	1	6	10.0	5	8.3	11	9.16	2.499	118	0.014
	2	18	30.0	34	56.7	52	43.33			
	3	20	33.3	15	25.0	35	29.16			
	4	16	26.7	6	10.0	12	10.0			
Average		2.767		2.367		-	-			
Standard deviation		.9632		.7804		-	-			
This person did not show much understanding to my situation	1	13	21.7	27	45.0	40	33.33	3.204	118	0.002
	2	19	31.7	19	31.7	37	30.83			
	3	25	41.7	13	21.7	38	31.66			
	4	3	5.0	1	1.7	4	3.33			
Average		2.300		1.800		-	-			
Standard deviation		.8694		.8397		-	-			
This person made me feel important	1	12	20.0	3	5.0	15	12.5	-2.649	118	.009
	2	15	25.0	12	20.0	27	22.5			
	3	24	40.0	31	51.7	55	45.83			
	4	9	15.0	14	23.3	23	19.16			
Average		2.500		2.933		-	-			
Standard deviation		.9829		.7997		-	-			

Source: Own research

1-not true at all, 2- not true 3- true, 4- absolutely true

The students can greatly count on the fact that in the presence of their friends they will feel secure and safe. In the area *perceived available support* it is entirely true, the student declare, that *there are people who really like me* (41.7% of the given answers among the first class students and 63.3% among the third class students), students *know people they can always count*

– while in the first class only 43.3% hold on to that conviction, in the third class the number is 70.0%. Moreover, it is entirely true, declare students, that *there are people that offer help to students when needed* (while none of the students from the third class marked this sentence as *not true at all* every tenth students from the first class is convinced about it). The first class students also declare that to some extent is also true the sentence that *when I am worried there is someone who can help me* (38.3% of given answers), while the third class students claim that this sentence is absolutely true (43.3%).

In the area of *perceived available support* there were statistically valid differences between a group from the first and the third class pointing to the fact that the third class students more often declare that they *know people who really like me* ($t = -3.093$; $p < 0.002$), *know people who they can always count on* ($t = -3.428$; $p < 0.001$), *when they are worried there is someone who can help them* ($t = -2.628$; $p < 0.010$) and *there are people who offer them help when needed* ($t = -2.033$; $p < 0.044$).

In the area of *looking for support* the first class students declare that in a moderate way true is a sentence *that whenever I am down I look for someone who would cheer me up* (33.3%) while it is to a small amount true for 56.7% of the third class students.

In the area of *looking for support* there were statistically valid differences between the first and the third class students pointing to the fact that the students from the first class more often declare that *whenever they are down they look for someone who would cheer them up* ($t = 2.499$; $p < 0.014$).

In the area of *actually received support* the first class students declare that in a moderate way true is a sentence *that a typical peer did not display much understanding to my situation* (41.7%) while it is completely untrue for 45.0% the third class students. The first class students (40.0%) and the third class students (51.7%) also declare that in a moderate way true is a sentence *that a typical peer made me feel important*. The analysis in this area shows an important difference: while 20.0% of the first class students declare that the sentence *that a typical peer made me feel important* is not true at all, only 5.0% of the third class students is of a similar conviction.

In the area *actually received support* there were statistically valid differences between the first and the third class students indicating that the first class students more often declare that *a typical peer did not show much understanding to my situation* ($t = 3.204$; $p < 0.002$), but the third class students more often declare that *a typical peer made me feel important* ($t = -2.649$; $p < 0.009$).

In the fact of collected data in this area the zero hypothesis that an average opinion on social support given by a typical peer in a school among the first and the third class students does not differ should be rejected and the alternative hypothesis should be accepted – that an average opinion on social support given by a typical peer in a school among the first and the third class students does differ in the areas of *perceived available support*, *looking for support* and *actually given support*.

6. Conclusion

Summarizing the analysis of the research results it should be said that the first class students perceive a typical peer as *less competent but more amiable* than the third class students and have *compassion* toward one, what in turns allows us to assume that undertaken behavioral tendencies will remain in a category *active facilitation* (participation in help activity or group protection) or passive impediment toward peers in middle school what is confirmed by the analysis of research results referring to *intergroup threat theory* (Stephan, 2002). More frequent experiencing of unpleasant emotions toward a typical peer by the first class students might be connected with behavioral reactions of the first class students to a threat from peers – these students can have tendency to undertake active or passive behaviors in violent situations protecting themselves rather than a group in which they function. In the area of *actually received support* the group of the first class students indeed more frequently declare that *a typical peer did not display much understanding to my situation*. In the area of *looking for support* group of the first class students, in fact, declares more often that *whenever they feel down they look for someone to cheer them up*.

The third class students, however, perceive peers as sociable *more competent* and *more amiable* than their peers in the first class and feel *respect*, what allows to suppose that behavioral tendencies they undertake will remain in categories of either *passive facilitation* (declared readiness for cooperation, establishing relations) or *active facilitation* (participation in help or protection of a group). The third class students more often try to befriend peers, as well as are ready to delegate important task to a peer in a projects supervised by a teacher but also are more prone to undertake attempts to avoid contact with peers. In the area of *actually received support* the group of the third class students, in fact, more often declare that *a typical peer made them feel important*. In the area of *perceived available support* the third class students also more often declare that they *know people who really like them, who they can always count on, when they are worried there is someone ready to help them, there are people who offer them help when needed*.

Further research should be, then, directed into more in-depth study and evaluation of a social status of a typical peer in the perception of young people due to the fact that the results of

the research related to the stereotype content model SCM S. Fiske point to a rather low social status of a typical peer in the perception of a middle school student what was not confirmed by the research based on Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan, 2002). Further research, then, could be extended with identifying strength/power and analysis of goals of individuals/groups in peer relations of middle school students and also extend the research to another school types. Using the assumptions of Intergroup Threat Theory it would be worthwhile to analyse the extent to which the integrity of a peer group and the level of identification with such conditions the young people reactions to a threat.

Among the problems present at school the quality of student interaction is of a great importance and it should be associated with the support given in their development (Gaś, 2000). Evaluating the quality of peer relations – from indifference to mutual support – it should be stressed that the presented theories allow a fuller and more complete understanding of this area and more effective solutions for different types of conflicts between peers and in effect enable actions that might prevent alienation or rejection among young people.

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