

## Gender and Age Differences in Negative Problem Orientation among Palestinian Adolescents

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### Abstract

A crucial concept in our understanding of deficiencies in daily life is negative problem orientation, which is a collection of dysfunctional attitudes toward social problem-solving. Until recently, measuring negative problem orientation as a one-factor questionnaire, other than as a subscale in a measure of problem-solving ability, was still rare. This study aimed to find gender and age differences among 12-, 15-, and 18-year-old Palestinian adolescents. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted. Four hundred and ten adolescents were recruited to respond to the Negative Orientation Questionnaire (NEGORI) questionnaire. The study revealed no differences between Palestinian boys and girls at the age of 12 in the following factors: negative consequences, negative self-efficacy, and habits/patterns. However, fending off the problem, positive consequences, and waiting were more typical among 12-year-old Palestinian girls. In addition, no differences between Palestinian boys and girls at the ages of 15 and 18 were found in fending off the problems, positive consequences, habit/pattern, and waiting. However, the results showed that the negative consequences factor was more typical among 15- and 18-year-old Palestinian girls. Furthermore, no age differences among Palestinian adolescents were reported in the NEGORI factors.

**Keywords:** *Palestinian, adolescents, negative problem orientation*

### Introduction

Adolescence is a time of physical, mental, and social transformation that occurs between childhood and adulthood (Brothers, 1999). It is a stage of brain biological development (Casey et al., 2008) where adult adaptability starts to be altered (Blakemore, et al., 2010), and social ties change as well (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Since adolescents are part of communities, they deal with a variety of issues such as social problems (SP) which arise from daily interactions and call for effective interventions (D'Zurilla et al., 2002; Heppner et al., 2004; Nezu, 2004; Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021a; Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021b). People attempt to solve problems in a social situation through the cognitive-affective-behavioral process known as social problem-solving (SPS) (e.g., D'Zurilla et al., 2004). It is a self-directed process through which people look for ways to identify, learn about, and/or create solutions to the problems that they encounter daily (Nezu et al., 2012).

However, social problem solving, which is the act of addressing the social problems that arise in a natural social setting, consists of a number of distinct steps such as the positive orientation and the negative orientation of the problem (D'Zurilla & Maydeu-Olivares, 1995). It is interesting to note that weak problem-solving abilities are rarely correlated with ability deficiencies. Instead, studies have revealed that if deficiencies in problem solving are present, negative problem orientation is either the main or the only factor involved (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 1999, Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021c).

### **Adolescents' Social Problem-Solving in the Context of Palestine**

The Palestinian literature is poor in terms of investigations of SPS. Only two studies have addressed the issue of SPS among adolescents, consisting of a Master's thesis (El-Ghosain, 2008) and a published article (Aburezeq & Kasik, 2022).

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The aim of El-Ghosain (2008) was to study 150 male and female Palestinian adolescents' psychosocial changes and relationships to Social Problem Solving abilities. A Social Problem Solving Inventory-Revised (SPSI-R) (D'Zurilla et al., 2002) was used to examine the prevalence of SPS among Palestinian teenagers. The study revealed that there were no differences between the adolescent high achievers and poor achievers in terms of negative problem orientation (NPO) indicating a moderate degree of student capacity among both genders to solve their SP. It was revealed that the Palestinian adolescents' possession of SPS abilities was weak due to the methods of education that have been adopted by Palestinian society. Parents do not teach their children how to solve their social problems. Rather, the family takes the responsibility to solve their children's SPs; furthermore, schools do not teach SPS skills to their students.

Aburezeq and Kasik's (2022) study targeted a large number of respondents: 410 Palestinian adolescents (males = 201) and (females = 209), who were 12-, 15-, and 18- year olds. Additionally, it addressed the majority of family structures and the educational levels of parents. The study further explained that Palestinian adolescents had a positive orientation towards their problems and believed that their problems were solvable. They believed in their capability to cope with problems and achieve effective SPS solutions. However, Palestinian female adolescents tended to think negatively of their SPs, and showed a greater likelihood of avoiding dealing with problems or communicating with others when contrasted with male adolescents.

### ***What is Negative Problem Orientation (NPO)?***

Negative problem orientation is a vital concept to understand our inadequacy to solve problems. It involves a collection of dysfunctional thoughts towards resolving social problems that make people more anxious about issues and prevent them from being solved effectively (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2006; Bell & D'Zurilla, 2009). Such an orientation does contribute to poor SPS and has a special relationship with several mental health illnesses, such as eating disorders (Konstantellou et al., 2011), generalized anxiety disorder (Dupuy and Ladouceur, 2008), depressive disorder (Balsamo et al., 2013), and social anxiety disorder (Romano et al., 2019).

To succeed in social problem-solving, a number of factors are involved—an overall problem-orientation, the specific problem, the process of problem-solving, and the perception of one's problem-solving abilities (e.g., D'Zurilla et al., 2002; Strough & Keener, 2013). According to several studies (i.e., Eskin, 2013 and Kasik, 2015), having a negative orientation increases the risk of poor problem-solving because a person believes the situation at hand cannot be solved, and that there is nothing that can be done to find a solution. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that a person's negative orientation during childhood and adolescence may have long-term implications on the ability to succeed in school, maintain the social ties, and cope with the level of stress and despair (e.g., Eskin, 2013; Frauenknecht & Black, 2010). According to Chang et al. (2004), who measured the NPO of SPS-I, two major findings were found: NPO is often followed by impulsivity, which is an emotion-based stating of negative emotions. Such responses are often hasty or are followed by avoidance; finding a solution is simply deferred.

### ***NPO across Age and Gender***

Previous studies have revealed that negative orientation across gender and age might differ (Barahmand, 2008; Ciarrochi et al., 2009). Negative orientation has been found to be more typical in boys rather than girls. Moreover, definite age trends showed that NPO may be influenced by developmental tasks (Barahmand, 2008).

According to studies by Scheier et al. (1986) and Chang and Sanna (2001), adolescents who are negative tend to consider fewer options and make decisions based on their emotions, which usually leads to avoidance of problem-solving.

According to Frauenknecht and Black (2010), a person's family has a significant influence over the ability to change, and if a person feels the need to do so at all. Experiencing negative events in daily life can give rise to passive attitudes. Association values revealed that NPO and avoidance are seen as

helpful. This can be viewed as a workable temporary remedy (e.g., the pressure brought on by the problem is reduced). However, it might be disruptive in the long term because problems return later, and they place a negative impact on interpersonal relationships (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1994).

According to studies (e.g., D'Zurilla et al., 2004; Kasik, 2015), children who are between the ages of 10 and 11 typically start to develop a negative attitude toward social problems and problem-solving alongside a less common positive attitude. The relationship between NPO and avoidance steadily rises from the age of 13–15; girls in the 10–18 age range have the highest prevalence of NPO. Boys generally exhibit an uncommon pattern where NPO is linked to a high level of rationality and avoidance (Kasik, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the present study a greater understanding of SPS was sought in the Palestinian context by examining NPO by adopting NEGORI (Kasik et al., 2018) as an instrument. While there are just two studies in the Palestinian library addressing SPS, NPO is partly investigated by SPSI-R. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this could be the first field study in Palestine using a separate and independent measurement of NPO. This will provide more details more about how Palestinian adolescents engage in SPS, and how they cope, especially when dealing with factors such as: avoiding the problem, expecting negative results of the problem, having poor self-efficacy, expecting positive results when not dealing with the problem, imitating a habit/pattern of another person in dealing with the problem, and waiting for the problem to be resolved without their intervention.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were addressed in the study:

1. Are there any statistical differences in Negative Problem Orientation among Palestinian adolescents attributed to their gender (male or female)?
2. Are there any statistical differences in Negative Problem Orientation among Palestinian adolescents attributed to their age (12-, 15-, and 18-year-olds)?

### **Methodology**

The area of the study covered in this research is social psychology; in this study a descriptive approach was adopted.

### **Statistical Tools**

The following statistical tools were utilized in this study: Independent samples *t*-Test to show the differences between two genders for each age group, and One-Way ANOVA to show differences related to age (12, 15, and 18 years old).

### **Instrument**

NEGORI is a 21-item scale that measures only NPO (Kasik et al., 2018). The NEGORI subscales consists of 5-point (from 0 to 4) Likert-type items where: 0 = *Not at all true* of me; 1 = *Slightly true* of me; 2 = *Moderately true* of me; 3 = *Very true* of me; 4 = *Extremely true* of me. It has yielded quite good reliability indexes in all adolescent age groups and can measure the following aspects within NPO: (a) fending off the problem, (b) negative consequences, (c) negative self-efficacy, (d) positive consequences, (e) habit, pattern, and (f) waiting.

The statements of "fending off the problem" conveyed that adolescents do not wish to deal with their SPs as they believe that they did not cause them. "Negative consequences" showed individuals expecting temporary or permanently negative social consequences, and consequently causing bad feelings. "Negative self-efficacy" expressed adolescents' belief that they could not solve their problems, and thus they had negative attitudes toward the problem and its solution. "Positive consequences" revealed that individuals thought that not dealing with the problem had positive consequences for them, and they would not be nervous. In "habit, pattern," it is the individual's environment that provided the pattern not to deal with the SP. Finally, in "waiting," the adolescents expect their problems to solve themselves without their intervention.

### **The Instrument's Psychometric Properties**

The Arabic version of NEGORI was administered to a sub-sample of (49) adolescents who were 12, 15, and 18 years old in Palestine; these were members of the actual sample. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was high for all items of the Arabic version of NEGORI. Structural validity also was reported high at the .01 level for Fending off the Problem (.88), Negative Consequences (.87), Negative Self-Efficacy (.84), Positive Consequences (.80), Habit, Pattern (.77), and Waiting (.78). The overall Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was (.92), while a Cronbach's alpha value of .90 was reported for the factors. The first part of the Split Half Method was .86, while a value of .84 was obtained for the second part. A high value of the Spearman-Brown Coefficient (.95) was obtained, while .95 also was seen for the Guttman Split-Half Coefficient. Importantly, KMO and Bartlett's Test returned a reported value of .70 (Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021c).

### **Participants and Social Variables**

Palestinian adolescents were selected ( $N = 410$ ). Table 1 shows the responses for gender and age.

**Table 1** Distribution of Study Participants According to Gender and Age

Demographic Variables	Classification	Number	Percent
Gender	Male	201	49.0
	Female	209	51.0
Age	12 years old	124	30.2
	15 years old	127	31.0
	18 years old	159	38.8

The data indicated that the distribution between males (201) and females (209) was balanced. In addition, age number (12 years old = 124), (15 years old = 127), (18 years old = 159) was well distributed.

### **Answers to Research Questions**

The outcomes of the two questions are presented below. The answers are quantitatively presented utilizing statistical tools. The answers to the first research question "Are there any statistical differences in Negative Problem Orientation among the Palestinian adolescents attributed to their gender (male or female)?" are given in Tables 2, 3, and 4. It would be improper to compile all the ages in one analysis, as respondents have different ages with different characteristics.

Table 2 showed no differences between the Palestinian boys and girls at the age of 12 in the following factors: Negative Consequences (NC), Negative Self-Efficacy (NSE), and Habit/Pattern (HP). However, the results revealed that Fending Off the Problem (FP), Positive Consequences (PC), and Waiting (W) were more typical among 12-year-old Palestinian girls.

**Table 2** Responses to NEGORI Found in 12-year-old Palestinian Adolescents

Factors of Social Problem Solving	(Boys = 80)		(Girls = 44)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Fending Off the Problem	1.10	0.93	1.47	1.12	1.97	.05
Negative Consequences	1.07	0.89	1.46	1.06	0.38	.69
Negative Self-Efficacy	1.05	0.78	1.35	0.96	1.89	.06
Positive Consequences	1.42	1.08	1.50	1.03	2.22	.02
Habit/Pattern	1.02	0.86	1.25	0.96	1.37	.17
Waiting	1.00	0.84	1.51	1.03	2.95	.00

Table 3 revealed no differences between the Palestinian boys and girls at the age of 15 in most of the NEGORI factors: FP, PC, H/P, and W. However, the results showed that only NC and NSE were more typical among 15-year-old Palestinian girls.

**Table 3 Responses to NEGORI Found in 15-year-old Palestinian Adolescents**

Factors of Social Problem Solving	(Boys = 75)		(Girls = 52)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Fending Off the Problem	1.32	1.06	1.65	1.18	1.64	.10
Negative Consequences	1.28	0.96	1.66	1.09	2.05	.04
Negative Self-Efficacy	1.02	0.87	1.36	0.88	2.11	.03
Positive Consequences	1.15	0.89	1.41	0.92	1.59	.11
Habit/Pattern	1.11	0.88	1.27	0.93	1.00	.31
Waiting	1.06	0.84	1.34	1.00	1.69	.09

Notes. FP = Fending Off the Problem; NC = Negative Consequences; NSE = Negative Self-Efficacy; PC = Positive Consequences; H/P = Habit/Pattern; W = Waiting

Table 4 indicated that no differences were seen between Palestinian boys and girls at the age of 18 in most of the NEGORI factors: FP, NSE, PC, H/P, and W. However, the results showed that NC was more typical among 18-year-old Palestinian girls.

**Table 4 Responses to NEGORI Found in 18-year-old Palestinian Adolescents**

Factors of Social Problem Solving	(Boys = 54)		(Girls = 105)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Fending Off the Problem	1.17	0.89	1.43	1.18	1.41	.15
Negative Consequences	1.33	0.88	1.86	1.17	2.92	.00
Negative Self-Efficacy	1.05	0.86	1.35	1.12	1.72	.08
Positive Consequences	1.18	0.95	1.34	1.04	0.96	.33
Habit/Pattern	1.20	0.95	1.09	1.00	0.71	.47
Waiting	1.11	0.94	1.21	0.97	0.61	.53

Answers to the second question "Are there any statistical differences in Negative Problem Orientation among the Palestinian adolescents attributed to their age (12-, 15-, and 18-year-old)?" are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 Gender Responses to NEGORI**

Factor of NEGORI	12-year-olds	15-year-olds	18-year-olds	ANOVA <i>F</i> ( <i>p</i> )
	( <i>n</i> = 124)	( <i>n</i> = 127)	( <i>n</i> = 159)	
	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
Fending Off the Problem	1.23 (1.01)	1.45 (1.11)	1.34 (1.09)	1.33 (.26)
Negative Consequences	1.45 (1.06)	1.44 (1.03)	1.68 (1.10)	2.36 (.09)
Negative Self-Efficacy	1.16 (.85)	1.16 (.88)	1.25 (1.05)	0.40 (.66)
Positive Consequences	1.21 (.96)	1.26 (.91)	1.29 (1.01)	0.24 (.78)
Habit/Pattern	1.10 (.90)	1.17 (.91)	1.13 (.98)	0.18 (.83)
Waiting	1.18 (.94)	1.18 (.96)	1.18 (.96)	0.00 (.99)

Surprisingly, Table 5 showed no age differences in all factors among Palestinian adolescents. All the *p* values were above .05, which indicated that there were no significant differences.

## Discussion

The results of the first question address gender differences among the Palestinian adolescent targeted age groups (12, 15, and 18 years old) in their NPO to solve SP. Table 2 indicated the differences between gender at the age of 12, Table 3 at the age of 15, while Table 4 detailed the differences between gender at the age of 18.

Table 2 shows that Fending Off the Problem, Habit/Pattern, and Waiting factors are typical among 12-year-old Palestinian girls. This means that the 12-year-old Palestinian girls, in terms of their NPO,

are characterized by the flowing: They fend off their problems as they do not feel that they cause the problem and, therefore, they do not want to solve it. They attribute the problems to other people. They think positively, according to their perspective, not dealing with their problems—which is also a negative side despite its positivity to them; they think that not solving problems will keep them calm, not agitated, and not sad. In addition, they wait for the problem to be solved by itself over time, or by someone else, so they do not intervene to solve it. This result upholds a previous study by Szabó et al. (2015) that revealed girls were more likely to blame another person for a problem and wait for others to start looking for a solution, which involves accepting responsibility retrospectively and making informed decisions about the future. Abu Taha and Aburezeq (2018) further explained that Palestinian girls fear confrontation and this is why they have oral communication apprehension. However, the results obtained regarding this question show that there are no differences in habit/pattern between boys and girls, and thus differ from those of Kasik et al. (2018), who showed boys gained higher scores for the habit/pattern factor.

As reported in Tables 3 and 4, we find no differences between Palestinian boys and girls at the ages of 15 and 18 for most NPO factors. There were no differences in their FP, PC, H/P, or W. However, Palestinian 15- and 18-year-old girls showed that negative consequences were more typical of them when solving their social problems. The Palestinian girls at those ages expected potential negative consequences (e.g., they were either unable to address the issue because they had reasons such as the belief that it will not work out, and they would disappoint both themselves and/or others, or they thought that it would take care of itself). These results were in conformity with the observation that girls' values were higher than boys in the case of negative consequences. Only girls' responses consistently referenced fear of negative outcomes, which is consistent with research suggesting that they tend to approach problems and conflicts more emotionally, and that their responses are more influenced by others' opinions and self-formulated internal demands (e.g., Grusec & Davidov, 2007; Ladd, 2005). Furthermore, the results contradicted the study of Kasik et al. (2018), which revealed that negative self-efficacy and fending off the problem were typical of 18-year old boys.

Table 5 shows no age (12-, 15-, and 18- year-old) differences in all NPO factors among Palestinian adolescents. All the *p* values were above .05, which indicated that there were no significant differences. This means that all Palestinian adolescents had the same attitude towards their NPO, and that only among boys and girls did the differences appear, as shown in gender differences. However, the results of the second question were in contrast to previous studies that had found differences among ages. In Kasik et al. (2018), there were differences at ages 12, 15, and 18 in the NSE factor. It displayed a propensity to decline with age, while positive consequences were reported to fall among those ages. In the same study, fending off and negative consequences were more typical of 15- and 18-year-olds, while habit/pattern and waiting were dominant among 18-year-olds.

## **Conclusion**

The study targeted 410 Palestinian 12-, 15-, and 18- year-old adolescents to explain their characteristics by responding to the negative problem orientation questionnaire (NEGORI), and to see if there were differences attributable to gender or age. The study is considered new in the Palestinian literature and fills a research gap, as there are very few studies that target negative orientation toward social problems. However, studies that have examined SPS used SPSI-R by D'Zurilla and his colleagues, where negative problem orientation was one factor next to the other four factors (i.e., positive orientation, rational style, impulsive study, and avoidant style). Therefore, it is hard to find studies that used NEGORI, except for that of Kasik et al. (2018).

The study revealed no differences between Palestinian boys and girls at the age of 12 in the following factors: NC, NSE, and H/P. However, at the same age, the results revealed that FP, PC, and waiting were more typical among 12-year-old Palestinian girls than boys. In addition, the study indicated no differences existed between Palestinian boys and girls at the ages of 18 and 15 in most NEGORI factors as follows: FP, PC, H/P, and W. However, the results showed that only NC was more

typical among 18-and 15-year-old Palestinian girls than boys. Furthermore, no age differences were found in whole NPO factors among Palestinian adolescents.

The study is considered a new one in the Palestinian context. It contributes to the overall understanding of how Palestinian adolescents solve their problems, and why they may abstain from solving them.

### **Recommendations**

Since this study was confined to the NPO factors, it is recommended that other NPO aspects should be investigated among Palestinian adolescents using different ages (i.e., 11, 13, 14, 16, and 17) years old. However, NEGORI could also be studied among the previously mentioned ages in order to form an overall view of Palestinian adolescents' NPO. Other social variables (i.e., parents' education, family composition, or adolescents' educational level) might be studied in connection to the development of negative problem orientation.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This study was conducted in the Gaza Strip in Palestine during 2021/2022. A good geographical distribution among the participants was achieved as they were brought from different locations; thus, the sample might be regarded as representative of the entire Gaza Strip's adolescent population. The study was confined to the following ages: 12, 15, and 18-year olds using NEGORI as an instrument.

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**Appendix 1: The NEGORI Questionnaire – English Version (Kasik, et al., 2018)**

I do not solve my peer related problems because...		0	1	2	3	4
1.	I am sure I cannot solve the problem.	0	1	2	3	4
2.	Not solving them keeps me calm.	0	1	2	3	4
3.	I am awkward, so I cannot solve the problem.	0	1	2	3	4
4.	I did not cause the problem.	0	1	2	3	4
5.	I do not trust that I can solve the problem.	0	1	2	3	4
6.	I am afraid that my attempt might go wrong.	0	1	2	3	4
7.	I am waiting for our problem to solve itself.	0	1	2	3	4
8.	It is usually not my fault.	0	1	2	3	4
9.	I am afraid that it might end badly.	0	1	2	3	4
10.	This way I avoid becoming agitated.	0	1	2	3	4
11.	The other person has caused the problem.	0	1	2	3	4
12.	My friends usually do not solve theirs either.	0	1	2	3	4
13.	It solves itself anyway.	0	1	2	3	4
14.	This is how we react to such a situation at home.	0	1	2	3	4
15.	If it cannot be solved, it will become worse for me.	0	1	2	3	4
16.	I am not the cause of the problem.	0	1	2	3	4
17.	This way I will not become sad.	0	1	2	3	4
18.	I am unable to solve my problems.	0	1	2	3	4
19.	I am afraid that something bad might come out of it.	0	1	2	3	4
20.	My teachers do not deal with problems either.	0	1	2	3	4
21.	It will get solved somehow.	0	1	2	3	4

**Appendix (2) NEGORI Questionnaire -Arabic Version (Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021c).**

4	3	2	1	0	لا أستطيع حل المشكلات المرتبطة بالأقران .....
4	3	2	1	0	1. لأني لست متأكداً بأني قادر على حلها.
4	3	2	1	0	2. لأن عدم حلها يجعلني هادئاً.
4	3	2	1	0	3. لأني أشعر بالحرج، وبالتالي لا أستطيع حلها.
4	3	2	1	0	4. لأني لم اتسبب في تلك المشكلات.
4	3	2	1	0	5. لأني لست واثقاً بأني قادر على حلها.
4	3	2	1	0	6. لأني خائفاً بأن تفشل المساعي التي أقوم بها لحلها.
4	3	2	1	0	7. لأني أنتظر من المشكلات أن تحل نفسها بنفسها.
4	3	2	1	0	8. لأنها لست خطأي.
4	3	2	1	0	9. لأني أتخوف أن تنتهي بشكل سيء.
4	3	2	1	0	10. لأنه بهذه الطريقة اتجنب أن أكون منفعلاً.
4	3	2	1	0	11. لأن الشخص الآخر هو من تسبب في المشكلة.
4	3	2	1	0	12. لأن أصدقائي لا يستطيعون حل مشاكلهم أيضاً.
4	3	2	1	0	13. لأنها تحل نفسها بنفسها على أية حال.
4	3	2	1	0	14. لأننا نتعامل بهذه الطريقة في البيت.
4	3	2	1	0	15. لأنه لو لم يتم حلها، ستصبح أسوأ بالنسبة لي.
4	3	2	1	0	16. لأني لست المسبب للمشكلات.
4	3	2	1	0	17. لأنه بهذه الطريقة لن أكون حزيناً.
4	3	2	1	0	18. لأني غير قادر على حل مشكلاتي.
4	3	2	1	0	19. لأني أخاف أن يُنتج شيئاً سيئاً منها.
4	3	2	1	0	20. لأن معلمي لا يتعاملون مع المشكلات أيضاً.
4	3	2	1	0	21. لأنه سوف يتم حلها بطريقة ما.