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BULLYING IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE VIEW OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Bullying is one of the most serious problems that education has, and one of the most serious problems of the educational system in this day and age. It affects almost all students, with them either being a bully, a victim of bullying, or a bystander. But it also has an important effect on the teaching staff, the schools themselves, and the educational system. For this research, we asked first- and second-year university students about their perception of bullying in their stages as students of primary and secondary education. To do this, we evaluated 654 university students: 195 men (29.82%) and 459 women (70.18%). These students were from eight different departments at the University of Zaragoza. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 27 years, with an average of 22.54 years (s.d. = .292). The results showed that men tend to be bullies to a greater extent than women, and no relationship was found between gender and being a victim of bullying. In addition, it was found that nearly two out of every three students have experienced bullying during these stages of education and that almost all students (nine out of ten) have seen episodes of bullying. As a conclusion, we must point out the need for further studies and research work to discuss and analyze the phenomenon of bullying – a phenomenon that affects both students and our educational system.

Keywords: Bullying at school, bully, victim, bystander, primary education, secondary education.

1. Introduction

Recently, the educational community and society in general are both getting used to the fact that more and more attention is being paid by the media to violent behavior and events in schools – this is even to a greater extent than the attention paid to specific matters of education and culture. Episodes of violence in schools have the great ability to captivate the public's attention, bringing up cases that border on "social alarm" and becoming the center of demand and pressure by society on teachers, faculty members, and the school (Garaigordobil, 2017; Hadley, Mowbray, & Jacobs, 2017).

The term bullying, also sometimes known as "school harassment," was coined by Olweus in 1970 when he began to study the phenomenon of abuse among peers in the school environment. Since then nearly five decades have passed, progress has been made in terms of knowledge on this matter, and intervention programs have been developed in the educational sphere to prevent these types of behaviors when they appear; however, the data indicates that we are more in a stage of "intervention" than one of "prevention," as these episodes of violence are still occurring in our educational system – to a greater or lesser extent, and with greater or lesser intensity, depending on the place, the time, and the players (victims, bullies, and bystanders) involved. Despite the intense efforts made by teachers and educational authorities, bullying continues to happen (Bouman, van der Meulen, Goossens, Olthof, Vermande, & Aleva, 2012; Fanti & Kimonis, 2013; Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin, 2012; Olweus, 1993).

2. Problem Statement

Bullying begins in childhood. It has a higher incidence in early adolescence and, in bullying, violence is understood as a response designed to bring about a reduction in uncertainty about one's own identity, integration in the group, and a deviation from the hostility produced by frustrating and stressful situations (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014; Salmanian, Asadian-koohestani, & Mohammad, 2017; Schick & Cierpka, 2016; Stassen Berger, 2007).

The ways in which bullying occurs are several:

- Verbal intimidation (name-calling, nicknames, speaking badly of someone, rumors, etc.).
- Psychological intimidation (threats, forcing someone to do something, etc.).
- Physical aggression: both direct (fights, beatings, etc.) and indirect (breaking things, small thefts, etc.).
- Social isolation (prevention from participating in something, ignoring the victim's presence, etc.).
- Sexual harassment that makes the victim feel humiliated, uncomfortable, etc.
- Cyberbullying: threats or insults by means of a mobile telephone, email, social networks, etc.

3. Research Questions

In bullying, other factors can somehow be involved: not only factors involving the bully and the victim but also factors involving bystanders, who play a fundamental role (classmates, teachers, the school,

families, etc.). In the case of the victims, they begin to present symptoms of anxiousness and/or depression, characterized by a nervous, sad, or irritable mood, as well as by a lack of positive emotions and lack of pleasure and enjoyment in school and extra-curricular activities. Also, victims present problems in relationship with directing, maintaining, and regulating attention towards a task, they express anger in an exaggerated and inappropriate way, they behave disobediently towards parents and/or teachers, they throw excessive tantrums and have aggressive or violent behaviors. All of this ends up impacting their sense of self-efficacy in the academic environment and, this combined with academic performance, can lead to school failure and abandonment.

Nevertheless, there are no studies that include information about bullying from the perspective of time; that is to say, when the subject has finished his/her schooling. That is why it is important to know this information even though the bully and victim no longer share the same classroom.

4. Purpose of the Study

This study's aim was to analyze bullying in primary and secondary schools as seen by first-year university students.

Our research had two starting hypotheses: 1) men would show greater tendencies towards being the bully; 2) women would have a higher incidence of being victims of that bullying.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

Sampling was stratified, with the primary sampling unit being the university centers and the secondary sampling unit being level of education (first and second year of an undergraduate degree). The sample consisted of 654 university students: 195 men (29.82%) and 459 women (70.18%) from eight different departments at the University of Zaragoza. The participants' age was from 18 to 27, with an average age of 22.54 years (s.d. = .292). All of them participated in the study voluntarily, signed an informed consent form, and the ethical considerations of the Declaration of Helsinki were observed, as well as complying with the ethical guidelines for research with human beings (informed consent and the right to information, protection of personal data and guarantees of confidentiality, non-discrimination, gratuity, and the possibility to leave the study at any stage). The researchers administered surveys in each of the classes. The study was designed as a cross-sectional comparative study with natural group assignment, as the groups were formed with stable independent variables, belonging to the same culture, and individual differences were compared – both dependent and independent variables were recorded simultaneously (Ato & Vallejo, 2015).

5.2. Instruments

Bullying Questionnaire (Salavera et al., 2018): The instrument used to collect information was an ad-hoc questionnaire that allowed us to place all participants in the same psychological position and, additionally, facilitated the subsequent tabulation of responses and comparisons (Stoetzel & Girard, 1973).

Taking into account the general criteria of our research, we created a questionnaire which aligned with the objectives pursued. The main idea was to propose a format that could include issues relating to bullying from the standpoint of the bully, the victim, and the bystander while additionally allowing for analysis of the presence of certain factors that, according to the literature reviewed, could help to explain said behaviors – something which implied the need to include certain factors that had not been considered by similar instruments.

The end result was a questionnaire that included a first section to collect information of a general nature (such as data on age, gender, nationality, etc.) and a second section to collect information about bullying.

5.3. Procedure

To select the sample, the cooperation of educational centers was requested by telephone and, once participation was confirmed, the list of participating centers was drafted. When each questionnaire was distributed, the participants were explained the goal of our research, stressing the importance of completing all items on the questionnaire.

Participants had thirty minutes to complete the questionnaires described previously and to sign their informed consent forms. They were reminded that the information collected would be kept anonymous and confidential. The data collected by this study was obtained between April and May of 2017.

For statistical analysis of the data, the SPSS 22.0 software package was used. Once sample normality and equality of variances were verified, parametric methods were chosen. A descriptive analysis was undertaken for each of the variables. In all cases, the lowest possible level of significance was used and any differences with a value of $p<0.05$ were considered significant. Contrasts were considered bilaterally. For hypothesis contrast involving two groups, a comparison of averages was undertaken.

6. Findings

To evaluate bulling in the primary and secondary education phases, study participants were asked if they had undertaken, suffered from, or witnessed bullying over said educational periods. Results (Table 1) indicate that men tended to partake in bullying more than women, as we theorized in our first hypothesis. Meanwhile, women stated having witnessed bullying more frequently than men.

Table 01. Responses to the question of whether participants had been bullies, victims, or bystanders during their primary and secondary educational stages (by gender)

		Men	**Women**	**Total**
Bully	Never	84 (43.08%)	292	(63.62%)
	Few times	(51.79%)	162	(35.29%)
	Many times	(5.13%)	5 (1.09%)	15
Victim	Never	76 (38.97%)	169	(36.82%)
	Few times	92 (47.18%)	232	(50.54%)
	Many times	27 (13.85%)	58 (12.64%)	85 (13.00%)
Bystander	Never	(7.18%)	18	(3.92%)
	Few times	76 (38.97%)	161	(35.08%)
	Many times	(53.85%)	280	(61.00%)

In terms of the second hypothesis, which aimed to assess whether women were more often victims of bullying, a comparison of averages (Table 2) yielded no significant differences between men and women for this matter; thus, our second hypothesis could not be verified. In the comparison of averages for bullies and bystanders, results proved to be significant in terms of gender, verifying a greater incidence of men being the bullies in the cases assessed.

Table 02. Averages, standard deviation, and comparison of averages by gender

	Men	Women	Total	
	A (s.d.)	A (s.d.)	A (s.d.)	F (Sig.)
Bully	19.69 (4.14)	19.28 (3.05)	18.71 (3.48)	23.56 (.000)
Victim	20.93 (5.19)	21.13 (5.19)	21.11 (5.42)	.184 (.668)
Bystander	28.22 (6.42)	19.69 (6.65)	29.22 (6.60)	6.06 (.014)

7. Conclusion

Our research had two starting hypotheses: 1) men would show greater tendencies towards being the bully; 2) women would have a higher incidence of being victims of bullying than men.

The first hypothesis looked at the possible relationship between gender and a greater presence of bullying behaviors in men. The results of our research backed up that hypothesis: a greater number of men indicated that they had acted as bullies in cases of bullying during their school years. These results align with prior studies (Baly, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2014; Sánchez, Moreira, & Mirón, 2011) which have indicated that men participate as bullies more than women in cases of school harassment.

Additionally, our second hypothesis aimed to assess whether women had a higher incidence of being victims of bullying. Our research indicated that almost two out of three women in our sample suffered from bullying during primary and secondary school, and the figures were very similar for men. Thus, a relationship could not be established between one's gender and being a victim of bullying.

Nevertheless, the data obtained about participants who have been victims of bullying (almost two out of three) and about the fact that almost all students (nine out of ten) have witnessed episodes of bullying make us rethink the importance of behavioral problems in the classroom; especially the importance of bullying, making it necessary to undertake more studies and research work to discuss and analyze this phenomenon –a phenomenon that affects so many students– and to delve deeper into this line of research.

As weaknesses of this study, it must be noted that, while our sample was broad, it would be necessary to undertake longitudinal studies so as to assess bullying amongst children and teens thorough their developmental years. In this way, cross-cutting activities of a social and emotional nature could be implemented to work on the prevention of bullying at school.

As prospects for the future, the study can and should be broadened with educational programs that are specific to other constructs and which can act as protective factors against bullying, such as self-esteem, self-concept, emotional intelligence, social skills, assertiveness, etc. These must be worked on and strengthened in all realms of the educational environment (Salavera, Usán, & Jarie, 2016). The data obtained in our research allows for the verification of the fact that men perpetrate bullying more than women. Likewise, victims are similar in terms of men and women – no differences were found in relationship with gender and the selection of bullying victims.

The results from this study encourage us to keep searching for new questions that will help us to define new strategies to be worked with and, in turn, to find answers to bullying.

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