

## **AGGRESSIVE VICTIMS' LONELINESS IN SCHOOL FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE: THE RELATIONAL WAY OF DEFENDING ONESELF**

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### **ABSTRACT**

School violence during adolescence is an area widely studied in the literature. A violent teenager at school can use both overt and relational violent behavior. Victims may differ in their reactions to the violent actions in school, in the sense that whereas some victims behave passively and submissively to the aggressors, others tend to show hostile behaviors, often in response to the victimization they are suffering.

The victim-offender dynamic sets an interpersonal relationship model that involves serious consequences for the psychosocial adjustment of victims, such as feelings of loneliness, depressive symptomatology, and low self-esteem. However, very few studies have considered victimization as a risk factor associated with externalizing behaviors such as, for example, school violence. Recent research has applied to the school context the explanatory model developed by Emler and Reicher (2005) on the relationship between victimization and criminal and antisocial behavior in adolescence. Using this model, this chapter discusses the role of loneliness in the dynamic that leads some victimized adolescents to attack their peers.

The study of relational violence has been relegated among research interests when trying to explain why some victims are also violent with their peers in the school context. However, it is likely that victimized students with a social and psychological profile showing high levels of loneliness and depressive symptomatology and low self-esteem, become involved more frequently in violent relational behavior than in manifest violent acts. As previous research has identified significant differences between girls and boys in

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their involvement in violent behavior and victimization at school, this chapter adopts a gender perspective.

Finally, in order to prevent this type of behavior in school, it is important to take into account the adolescents' perception of the school social environment. The perception of a positive classroom environment seems to be an important factor for students' social adjustment, which prevents school violence and feelings of loneliness.

**Keywords:** Loneliness, Adolescence, Victimization at school, Violent behavior at school, Gender

Research of violent human behavior provides numerous definitions of this construct. For example, violence can be defined as behavior implying the use of coercive means to hurt others and/or to satisfy the individual's own interests (Little, Henrich, Jones, & Hawley, 2003a). In a similar vein, The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as "*the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation*" (WHO, 2002; p. 5). However in spite of the diversity of the nuances, most of the definitions coincide in two essential elements to describe a behavior as violent: intentionality and power.

School is a context in which children and youth spend a large part their time, frequently producing violent behavior. The term *school violence* refers to different adolescent behaviors in the school context: violence towards peers, violence towards adults, destroying property, vandalism, and bullying (Ortega-Ruiz, 2010). That is, not all violent school behavior can be defined as bullying. Olweus (1983) defined bullying as a behavior of physical and/or psychological persecution of a student who is chosen as the victim of repeated attacks by another student. This negative and intentional action places the victims in a position from which it is very difficult for them to escape on their own. For Olweus, bullying is a violent behavior among classmates characterized by its intentionality, persistence, and unequal power.

## TYPES OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

School violence frequently implies students' transgression of the school and social rules that govern coexistence in the classroom and the educational center (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Some of these behaviors are aimed at school objects or material (vandalic acts) such as breaking desks and doors, or painting names, messages, and drawings on the walls of the center. Other more serious behaviors are aimed at harming other people, mainly classmates, but also teachers, by means of physical and verbal aggression, and they are considered breaches of school discipline (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). The present chapter focuses on school violence towards peers, that is, violence that implies victimization of a student or group by another student or group. *Victimization at school* is defined as the experience of being the target of violent physical, verbal, and psychological behaviors, perpetrated by peers within the school setting, particularly in places with scarce adult supervision (Graham, 2006).

Numerous investigations indicate that school violence can involve both manifest violent behaviors in the form of blows, insults, or nicknames, and relational violent behaviors by means of social exclusion, spreading rumors, or impeding the victim's inclusion in a group (Buelga, Musitu, & Murgui, 2009; Little, Henrich et al., 2003). The following table displays the classification proposals of violence, elaborated by diverse authors.

## TYPES OF VICTIMS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Victims are submitted to a great variety of behaviors committed by another student or group of students, for example: being the target of ridicule, nicknames, being ignored and socially isolated, being deliberately excluded from the group of friends, being beaten, shoved and threatened, among others (Mynard & Joseph, 2000). However, victims do not react similarly to violent acts at school. Two subgroups of victims of school violence have been identified. In the first group are the students who react passively and submissively towards the aggressors (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). In the second group are the victimized students who are, in turn, aggressive (Boulton & Smith, 1994), also called the group of provocative victims (Olweus, 2001) or aggressive victims (Schwartz et al., 2001). Aggressive victims frequently display hostile behaviors as a response to the victimization they suffer (Schwartz, 2000).

**Table 1. Classifications of types of violence (Cava & Martínez, 2013)**

Little, Brauner, Jones, Nock, & Hawley (2003); Little, Henrich et al. (2003)	<p>FORMS: manifest – relational</p> <p><i>Direct or manifest violence.</i> Behaviors that involve direct confrontation of others with the intention of causing harm (shoving, hitting, threatening, insulting...).</p> <p><i>Indirect or relational violence.</i> Acts aimed at damaging another person's circle of friends or his/her membership in a group (social exclusion, social rejection, spreading rumors...).</p> <p>FUNCTIONS: reactive-proactive</p> <p><i>Reactive violence.</i> It refers to behaviors involving a defensive response to some provocation. This aggression is usually related to problems of impulsivity and self-control and to the existence of bias in the interpretation of social relations due to the tendency to make hostile attributions of others' behavior.</p> <p><i>Proactive violence.</i> It refers to behaviors implying the anticipation of benefits; it is deliberate and controlled by external reinforcements. This type of aggression has been related to subsequent problems of delinquency, but also to high levels of social competence and leadership skills.</p>
Anderson & Bushman (2002)	<p><i>Hostile violence.</i> It refers to impulsive, unplanned behavior, the goal of which is to cause harm and it usually arises as a reaction to a perceived provocation.</p> <p><i>Instrumental violence.</i> Violent behavior is a premeditated means to achieve the aggressor's goals and purposes; it is not triggered only as a reaction to prior provocation.</p>
Serrano & Iborra (2005)	<p>Types of school violence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>physical maltreatment</li> <li>emotional maltreatment</li> <li>neglect</li> <li>sexual abuse</li> <li>economic maltreatment</li> <li>vandalism</li> </ul>

We know that only a minority of students from primary and secondary education engage in violence against peers at school, either as perpetrators or as victims, or performing both roles the same time. For example, in a study carried out by Povedano, Estévez, Martínez, and Monreal (2012) with a total of 1884 adolescents aged between 11 and 17 years, 7.2% were classified as aggressors, 7.3% as passive victims, and 1.7% as aggressive victims. The results of this investigation are consistent with those of other studies indicating that the group of aggressive victims represents approximately 10% of the total victims (Estévez, Murgui, & Musitu, 2009; Olweus, 2001).

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE IN THE VICTIMS**

The aggressor-victim dynamic is a model of interpersonal relations that leads to severe consequences for the psychosocial adjustment of the victims (Guterman, Hahn, & Cameron, 2002). Numerous studies in the scientific literature show a strong relation between peer victimization and internalizing problems, for example, strong feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, or high depressive symptomatology (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), whereas very few works have considered victimization as a risk factor related to externalizing behavior, for example, violent behavior at school (the case of the aggressive victim who used to be simply a victimized student).

In spite of the scarcity of works, the existing publications conclude that aggressive victims suffer the consequences for their psychosocial health to a greater extent than their classmates (Estévez, Martínez, Herrero, & Musitu, 2006). Accordingly, it has been observed that these victims obtain lower scores in self-esteem, more depressive symptomatology, and, basically, lower life satisfaction than the rest of their classmates, including the passive victims (Estévez, Jiménez, Moreno, & Musitu, 2013; Unnever, 2005). Passive victims usually present higher levels of feelings of loneliness than aggressive victims or even than aggressors (not victimized) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In view of these observations, one could conclude that victims who also engage in violent acts towards their peers obtain some benefit that partially buffers their feeling of loneliness, which does not occur with passive victims. This benefit seems to be related to the fact of acting as a group, in a gang in which these antisocial and violent behaviors are not only allowed, but applauded by group members.

## **THE ROLE OF LONELINESS**

Loneliness is a cognitive and affective reaction to the threat of the loss of a person's social and affective ties (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). The scientific literature identifies two components related to loneliness: (a) a cognitive component, which compares the desired and the real social and affective relations quantitatively and qualitatively; and (b) an affective component involving negative emotional experiences of isolation, sadness, emptiness, longing, disorientation or feeling lost, among others.

As mentioned above, research has revealed an association between the experience of being a victim of violence at school and the perception of loneliness in adolescents (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Løhre, 2012). However, research of the effects of loneliness on

victimized adolescents' psychosocial adjustment is still incipient. Sociometric status is a broadly recognized technique used as an indicator of psychosocial adjustment of adolescents at school (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Prinstein & La Greca, 2004) which allows identifying rejected, popular, ignored, or controversial students within the school setting (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

It is well known that solitary adolescents are rejected more by their classmates than popular students (Løhre, 2012). Popularity is very important in adolescents' life at school, and they are sometimes prepared to engage in disruptive behavior in order to achieve the acknowledgement of their peers and fame in the school setting. Numerous investigations have confirmed that low engagement in disruptive acts is related to peer acceptance, whereas rejection is associated with greater violence (Deptula & Cohen, 2004; Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). However, other lines of research indicate that some violent adolescents are frequently students who are accepted (Hawley & Vaughn, 2003) and popular in their peer group at school (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). In this sense, a victimized student who feels lonely may see a way to achieve popularity and acknowledgment among classmates through violent behavior at school, which would allow him or her to abandon the situation of victimization and loneliness suffered.

Recent investigations have transferred the explanatory model developed by Emler and Reicher (2005) of the relation between victimization and antisocial juvenile behavior to the school setting (Estévez et al., 2013). On the one hand, these authors indicate that the desire or motivation to achieve social recognition, in other words, to forge a certain social status, constitutes a risk factor for participation in antisocial and violent behavior in adolescence (Carroll, Houghton, Hattie, & Durkin, 1999; Emler & Reicher, 1995). From this viewpoint, the engagement in violent behavior by adolescents who are victimized by their peers could be understood as a response to seeking a certain social reputation based on acknowledgment, leadership, power in the group, and nonconformism (Carroll, Green, Houghton, & Wood, 2003; Carroll, Houghton, Durkin, & Hattie, 2001; Emler, 2009; Emler & Reicher, 2005). The acknowledgment of the peer group has clear benefits for adolescents, as it positively affects the feeling of belonging and social integration (versus the feeling of loneliness) (Moreno, Estévez, Murgui, & Musitu, 2009).

On the other hand, the model proposed by Estévez et al. (2013) suggests that when adolescents are the victims of violence at school, they trust the adults with authority to protect them. However, the law of silence about school violence prevailing among students often means that adults do not detect the victims and cannot offer them adequate protection. This may lead to the adolescents' disappointment with these adult agents, increasing their distrust towards them and towards the social norms they represent, as well as promoting their perception of loneliness in the face of the problem they are suffering (Povedano, Cava, Monreal, Varela, & Musitu, 2015). Transgression of social norms and involvement in disruptive behavior, such as school violence, could be a way of expressing the student's disappointment with the protective measures designed by the adults in view of the classmates' attacks at school, but which do not solve the problem.

## **RELATIONAL AGGRESSIVE-VICTIMS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

The incipient research of aggressive victims has focused on examining the profile of victims who present problems of manifest aggression. However, relational violence, a more subtle and less visible aggressive behavior, which can have consequences that are as negative for adolescent psychosocial adjustment as those derived from manifest violence, has been traditionally relegated from researchers' interest (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

Nevertheless, it is very likely that victimized students, with a social and emotional profile marked by high levels loneliness and depressive symptomatology (Estévez et al., 2009), defend themselves from their classmates' attacks by engaging in more relational violent behavior than in manifest violent behavior. Aggression through more explicit behavior could lead to the victimized adolescents' identification, which would not be coherent with their psychosocial profile or with the implicit codes of the law of silence that weighs on them (Povedano et al., 2015). New investigations in this area could be developed to examine the role of loneliness in the dynamic that leads some victimized students to defend themselves by directing relational aggression against their classmates.

Another important aspect to be taken into account in research of violence and school victimization is the gender of the adolescents. In this sense, the scientific literature reports studies confirming that boys engage in direct violent behavior and suffer school victimization more than girls (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996). In addition, engaging in the process of school violence concurs, especially among girls, with the development of depressive symptomatology, low self-esteem, and low life satisfaction (Nolen-Hoeksema & Hilt, 2009; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999).

In a study carried out by Povedano et al. (2012), gender differences within each group of violent adolescents, victims, aggressive victims, and uninvolved students, were analyzed. In this investigation, it was observed that in the groups of aggressors, victims, and uninvolved students, boys had more adaptive profiles than girls. However, the data of this study found no gender differences in the group of aggressive victims, that is, these boys and girls similarly showed the least adaptive profiles of all the groups. These results suggest that for victims who also aggress, and especially in the case of boys, behaving violently could become their last resource for psychosocial survival, as it has a high cost in terms of their social emotional and emotional equilibrium. However, in this investigation, direct and relational forms of violence were not addressed.

In research on gender differences in violent adolescent behavior, there is a consensus among researchers indicating greater engagement in direct violent behavior among boys (Estévez, Povedano, Jiménez, & Musitu, 2012). However, the results of research on gender differences in relational behavior are diverse. On the one hand, some studies indicate that girls engage in relational violence more than boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Smith et al., 1999) but, in a robust line of research, no gender differences were found in adolescents' violent relational behavior (Hokoda, Lu, & Angeles, 2006; Swearer, 2008).

Some studies underline the importance of the variable loneliness and its possible explanation of the role of gender in aggressive victims who respond with relational violence. For victimized girls who suffer strong feelings of loneliness, engagement in violent behavior would not have a buffer effect on such feelings, as is the case for boys (Baron & Kenny,

1986; Povedano et al., 2015). That is, only victimized boys relieve their strong feelings of loneliness by engaging in violent school behavior against their classmates, but this is not the case for girls. In addition, the lack of psychosocial skills in the victimized boys who also aggress could foster the choice of more subtle strategies that are more coherent with their profile, such as relational violence, when trying to defend themselves or to respond to this stressor.

## CLASSROOM CLIMATE AND PREVENTION OF VICTIMIZATION

Engagement in the activities and tasks proposed in the classroom, perceiving classmates as friends and having a positive perception of the teacher as a reference adult who helps them are important protection factors that have been related to adolescents' social adaptation at school, as well as to lower participation in violent behavior (Blankemeyer, Flannery, & Vazsonyi, 2002; Estévez & Emler, 2011; Musitu, Estévez, & Emler, 2007). In contrast, victimized adolescents report a negative perception of the social classroom climate, they appraise their school life as very ungratifying, and they feel less attached to the school (Martínez, Povedano, Amador, & Moreno, 2012).

A social school climate perceived as positive by the adolescents could have a protector effect in the classroom against manifest violent behavior (Povedano, et al., 2015). This effect can be attributed to the fact that in a classroom with a good social climate, there are very few stimuli—if any—to engage in explicit and direct behaviors that distort the good climate created by the entire class (Moreno, Povedano, Martínez, & Musitu, 2012). In addition, a good classroom climate seems to suppress students' interest in forging fame or a nonconformist reputation, while preventing adolescents' perception of loneliness. Prior studies have shown that friendship among classmates can protect the students from the adverse effects of victimization (Erath, Flanagan, Bierman, & Tu, 2010; Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). When victimized adolescents do not trust the support and orientation that they can receive from teachers and classmates, that is, they perceive a negative school climate, it is more likely for them to choose dysfunctional responses (such as relational violence) rather than functional ones (such as dialogue and communication) (Jiménez, Estévez, del Moral, & Povedano, 2011).

Moreover, the subtlety of violent relational behavior in the classroom and the prevailing law of silence for the victims of school violence could prevent adults from being aware of the situation undergone by these students. It is essential to deal with this so that the adolescents who suffer situations of victimization at school do not feel alone, cheated, and unprotected from these abuses, and forced to choose measures of self-protection. The implementation at school of specific workshops for the teachers and the psychopedagogical support teams addressing the very subtle signals that sometimes allow the early detection of victimization, and that provide tools to deal with situations of classroom violence can promote adolescents' more adaptive responses, and especially, prevent such situations of victimization. In addition, teachers' promotion of a good classroom climate seems to be a protection factor against violence at school, and the implementation of a consensual set of rules could also be a way to achieve a good climate (Álvarez, Dobarro, Rodríguez, Núñez, & Álvarez, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

This work provides novel information about victims and how they defend themselves at school through relational violence towards their classmates. Firstly, the incipient research on victims who are also violent at school suggests that, although this group is not very numerous, these adolescents are at high psychosocial risk. That is, they obtain lower scores in self-esteem, show more depressive symptomatology, and have less life satisfaction than the rest of their classmates, including the passive victims. However, passive victims present more feelings of loneliness than aggressive victims and than aggressors. Secondly, loneliness seems to play a relevant role in the explanation of why some victimized adolescents engage in violent relational behavior in the classroom. Victimized adolescents with strong feelings of loneliness could perceive that violent behavior is a way to gain recognition and popularity, which could protect them from new attacks, so they engage in this type of disruptive behavior. In addition, the victims' disappointment with the authority figures for not protecting them could foster their choice of subtle strategies that are coherent with their psychosocial profile, such as relational violence, as a means of self-defense against their classmates' aggression. The consideration of aggressive victims' gender is also relevant to understand the dynamic that leads some victims to aggress their classmates relationally.

Likewise, a classroom in which trust in the teacher, friendly relations among the classmates, and consensus about the rules are promoted seems to have a protector effect against students' engagement in violent behavior, both direct and relational, and it also protects the students from the adverse effects of victimization, such as feelings loneliness. Lastly, future investigations could advance in this line of research, addressing the influence of other relevant factors such as the family, the peers, and the individual characteristics of these adolescents, as suggested in recent works such as those of Cerezo, Méndez and Ato (2013) and Sobral, Villar, Gómez, Romero, and Luengo (2013).

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