

School violence roles and sociometric status among Spanish students

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Abstract: This study examines the relation between the social adjustment in the classroom and the role of aggressor or victim, in school violence situations. Participants were 1,635 students (aged 14-18 years old), from a representative sample, with different levels (compulsory secondary education, specific/initial training courses and vocational programs). Students filled out a questionnaire that included measures of types of violence (exclusion, verbal violence, physical violence), from the point of view of the three roles that are implicated (aggressors, victims and observants), and a sociometric questionnaire. The variables measured were: frequency of school violence (exclusion, psychological violence and physical violence) and the peer status (rejected, controversial, neglected, average or popular). The statistic analyses used were χ^2 - and F- tests. From the results we can point out the importance of these variables in the school violence situations. The implications of these findings and the relevance for preventive programs are discussed.

Key words: student violence; school violence; bullying; peer harassment; adolescents; peers network; sociometric; peer status

1. Introduction

Violence and aggression in schools are problems in many countries around the world (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Boivin, 1998; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Smith & Sharp, 1994; Olweus, 1978, 1998; Ombudsman's Office, 2000, 2006). The problem seems particularly acute in Spanish schools, where the news media report a variety of disturbing incidents, in the same way as it has happened in other countries, like US (Pellegrini, Bartini & Brooks, 1999). Although it is not a new phenomenon, not until the sixties decade began a systematic line of research about it in Europe, and the nineties decade in Spain (Ortega, Fernández & Del Rey, 2003).

The first national study in Spain, about the problem of school violence, was the "Evaluation of Secondary School Teachers", carried out by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (CIDE) in 1995, in which 72% of the 18,000 teachers surveyed considered the lack of discipline at school as a serious problem. Two years later, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture's National Institute for Quality and Evaluation (INCE) undertook a "General Diagnosis of the Education System", in which 60% of the teachers indicated that there had been isolated cases of aggression among students in the previous three years. However, in 7% of the schools, during the same period, more than ten cases of serious aggression had occurred (Ortega, Fernández & Del Rey, 2003).

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A special kind of violence situations among peers is the bullying problem. This phenomenon has been the most extensively-studied situation, in all the variety of school violence behaviors. Bullying among children can be considered as a form of abuse. It is intentional, unprovoked, and aims to cause pain and distress to another child. It is conducted by one or more children, and usually on repeated occasions, and it occurs to some extent in all schools (Olweus, 1978). Bullying exists when “a person or group of people from the school is insulted, physically assaulted, socially excluded or isolate, harassed, threatened or intimidated by another/others who do these things to the victim(s) with impunity. If these behaviours are not mere incidences, but rather are repeated, the victim finds himself psychologically, physically or socially defenseless due to a decrease in self-esteem, personal safety and initiative capacity caused by the action of the aggressor(s), the absence or scarcity of outside help and the continuous nature of this social situation” (Ortega, 2000). Generally, bullying is perpetrated by an identifiable group of bullies who systematically victimize specific groups of their peers. Bullying is either physical or psychological, and verbal bullying is the most common form (Smith & Sharp, 1994). About different variables that are involved, bullying problems are more frequent among boys than girls. Girls are involved more commonly in psychological bullying, whereas among boys physical bullying is more frequent than it is among girls (Stpehenson & Smith, 1989; Martín Seoane, Pulido & Vera, in press; Lucas, Pulido, Martín Seoane & Calderón, 2008). Bullying behavior is also relatively more common among younger children than older ones (Whitney & Smith, 1993).

Vieira, Fernández and Quevedo (1989) conducted the first research, specifically about bullying, in Spain, generating a great interest and beginning a prolific field of investigation. They found that 17% of the students (8-12 years old) were bullies and 17% were victims, in Madrid. Cerezo and Esteban (1992), in a study carried out in Murcia, found 11.4% of aggressors and 5.4% of victims. At the request of Parliament, the Ombudsman’s Office planned a national study on abuse among students, in a representative sample of secondary schools across Spain. Among the objectives of this study was to find out the incidence of the different types of abuse (physical, verbal and social), to describe under the circumstances, and settings in which certain types of abuse are produced. Thirteen types of violent acts were evaluated: ignoring, not allowing to participate, criticizing, insulting, nicknaming, hiding things, breaking things, stealing, hitting, threatening in order to frighten, forcing to do things, sexually harassing, threatening with weapons (Ombudsman’s Office, 2000; 2006).

There is still no consensus regarding the definition of the complex problem of school violence, but in the last few years, it has become common to refer to it as problems of coexistence (Ortega & Mora-Merchán, 1999), but also there is no general activity from the government directed to prevent violence (Ortega, Fernández & Del Rey, in press).

If we understand bullying as group phenomenon, then the analysis of social relations among pupils is essential (Cerezo, 2006), although very little current research on the peer system is concerned with group process. Insofar as children are largely situated within groups of peers, and considering that their relations with specific peers largely occur within a group context, efforts to understand peer experiences without considering group processes and characteristics are unlikely to be completely successful (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001). Possible influences of the network of relations within the class, and deliberate to what extent the victim is a victim of not only the attacks of the aggressor but also of the social climate prevailing within the group, which being a closed system excludes the victim and gives importance to the aggressor (Cerezo, 2006). A clear consensus exists among social developmental researchers that children’s peer relations provide unique and essential contributions to social and emotional development (Asher & Coie, 1990). And as individuals enter adolescence, relationships with peers

become increasingly important for the development of their sense of self (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001).

Researches related to school violence and/or bullying have found a relation between these variables and the sociometric status in the classroom. A meta-analytic review of these sociometric statuses (Newcomb, Bukowski & Pattee, 1993) showed that popular children's array of competencies makes them likely recipients of positive peer nominations, whereas high levels of aggression and withdrawal are associated with rejected peer status. A consistent profile marked by less sociability and aggression emerged for neglected status, and controversial children had higher aggressive behaviour than rejected children. Some other studies have shown relation between: peer relations and later behavioural adjustment (Kupersmidt, Coie & Dodge, 1990); particular types of children (aggressive and withdrawn) and a greater risk for being victimized (Bukowski & Sippola, 1995; Olweus, 1993); and a relationship between rejected and controversial boys and being more aggressive than other boys (Coie & Dodge, 1988). Boulton and Smith (1994), in a sample with 158 children from middle schools, observed that sociometrically rejected children received more bully, and more victim, nominations than other sociometric status groups, and both bullies and victims were less likely to belong to the popular group, and more likely to belong to the rejected group, than non-bullies and non-victims.

In the present study, we examine the incidence of school violence situations, in a representative sample of Madrid students. This general objective can be divided into these three specific ones: (1) to settle the incidence of the different modalities/roles of peer harassment (victim, aggressor and observers); (2) to analyze the adjustment to the classroom environment (rejected, controversial, neglected, average and popular); and (3) the relationship between participating in the school violence situations and the classroom adjustment status.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The research was conducted in Madrid schools: public (maintained using state funds or funds from the autonomous community), private subsidized (financed through agreements with public funds) or completely private (maintained with their own funds). Participants were 1,635 students (14-18 years old), selected with a random sample (the analyzed unity was the educational center). The sampling was carried out by clusters, with a maximum sampling error margin of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. This sampling method is typically used in the educational research.

2.2 Instruments

The questionnaires, with high levels of reliability and validity, are the following:

(1) CEVEO (Díaz-Aguado, Martínez Arias & Martín Seoane, 2004). It measures violence situations between peers in the educational context, through different roles (victims, aggressors and observants), and different situations (psychological violence, physical). The instrument distinguishes between 15 different types of violence: ignoring, not allowing to participate, criticizing, rejecting, insulting, nicknaming, hiding things, breaking things, stealing, hitting, threatening in order to frighten, forcing to do things, intimidating with sexual insults, forcing to sexual situations, and threatening with weapons. There are two differences with the 13 items used in the Ombudsman's Office study, as "rejecting" was included, and "sexually harassing" was divided into "intimidating with sexual insults" and "forcing to sexual situations". All these situations were measured by a 5-point-Likert scale (1=never happens; 5=always happens).

(2) Sociometric questionnaire (Coie, Dodge & Coppotelli, 1982). This peer nomination questionnaire is an

instrument to study the elections and rejections, and also positive and negative attributes, from the classmates' point of view. The students in each classroom are asked to list three classmates whom they "like the most" (elections) and three whom they "like the least" (rejections). Nominations are used to determine the status of the student because this procedure yields measures of status that have reasonably good stability across time (Coie & Dodge, 1983) and across new situations (Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983). The sociometric status group classification is based on the procedure and criteria described by Coie, Dodge and Coppotelli (1982). The total number of "liked most" (LM) and "liked least" (LL) peer nominations received by each student is tallied and standardized within each classroom. Social impact is the standardized sum of acceptance plus rejection ($SI=LM+LL$), whereas social preference is the standardized difference of acceptance minus rejection ($SP=LM-LL$). When the social impact and the social preference scores are computed, then the children are classified into five sociometric groups: popular, rejected, neglected, controversial and average. The defining criterion for each status groups is: popular are those students with $SP>1$, $LM>1$ and $LL<0$; rejected $SP<-1$, $LM<0$ and $LL>0$; neglected $SI<-1$, $LM<0$ and $LL<0$; controversial $SI>1$, $LM>0$ and $LL>0$; average $1>SP > -1$ and $1>SI>-1$ (see Figure 1).

(3) Demographic questions were included to obtained background information from the students (age and gender).

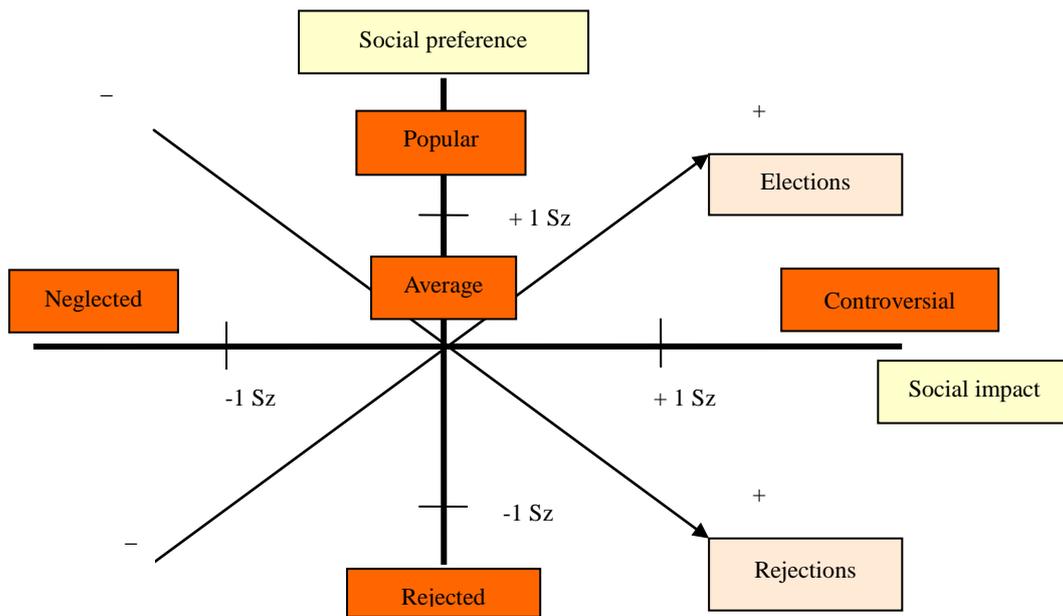


Figure 1 Peer status obtained with the Coie, Dodge & Coppotelli criteria

2.3 Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from school principals (by sending a letter with a description of the study, and an explanation about the voluntary nature of it). Students were approached in schools, in their own classes. They were told that the research was about life in schools. All students were asked to fill in a self-administered questionnaire measuring the variables under investigation. The administration was conducted by a researcher, who was a psychologist. The students were assured confidentially and no one in the school would have access to their questionnaire, so that they could answer truthfully. Students were seated separately so as not to allow conferring, talking or helping.

3. Results

The percentages of the school's violence incidence vary across roles. The results related to the victims are represented in Figure 2.

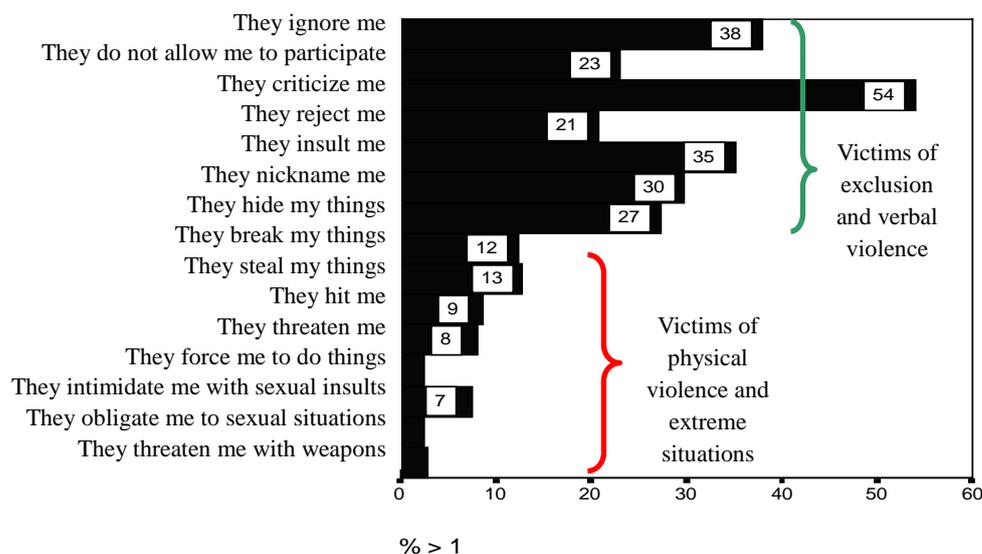


Figure 2 Percentages of victims

Victims suffer from being criticize by their peers in 54% of the cases, among which 38% are ignored, 35% are insulted, 30% are nicknamed, 23% are not allowed to participate, and 21% are rejected. Although less frequent, they suffer these physical situations: 27% are hidden of the cases, 13% are stolen, 12% are broken, 9% are hit, 8% are threatened and 7% are intimidated with sexual insults. The most dangerous situations (being forced to do things, being obligated to sexual situations, being threatened with weapons) have occurred in 1%-3% of the cases. As Figure 2 shows, the percentages of victims decrease in these physical violence and extreme situations. Although there are a small amount of students suffering them, they are very serious situations which need immediate interventions.

The results from the aggressor role are presented in Figure 2. The students recognize to participate in criticizing their peers in 65% of the cases, they ignore in 61%, they insult in 47%, they nickname in 46%, they do not allow to participate in 24%, and they reject in 35%. Although less frequent than they previous ones, they also participate in these physical situations: they hide things in 24% of the cases, they steal in 6%, they break things in 7%, they hit in 13%, they threaten in 12% and intimidate with sexual insults in 9%. The most risk situations (force to do things, obligate to sexual situations, threaten with weapons) have occurred in 1-3% of the cases.

In order to make more dynamic the presentation of the results, we run a factor analysis within the items, obtaining four factors. They explain 53%-65% of the total variance, and with a high correlation between factors (0.492-0.538). The four factor are: 0.70 Cronbach's alpha (Confidence Interval—CI 95%: 0.65-0.72) for “victims of exclusion and verbal violence situations”; 0.67 Cronbach's alpha (CI 95%: 0.63-0.70) for “victims of physical violence and extreme situations”; 0.86 Cronbach's alpha (CI 95%: 0.86-0.88) for “aggressors of exclusion and verbal violence situations”; 0.87 Cronbach's alpha (CI 95%: 0.86-0.88) for “aggressors of physical violence and extreme situations”. Theses results indicate that this scale is an internally consistent measure. It is important to

mention the high correlation between being victim of these two kinds of violence (0.555), and between being aggressor of these two kinds of violence (0.555). The four factors obtained are marked in both Figures 1 (victims) and 2 (aggressors). Also in Figure 3 this four factors are shown, comparing them with the observers role means.

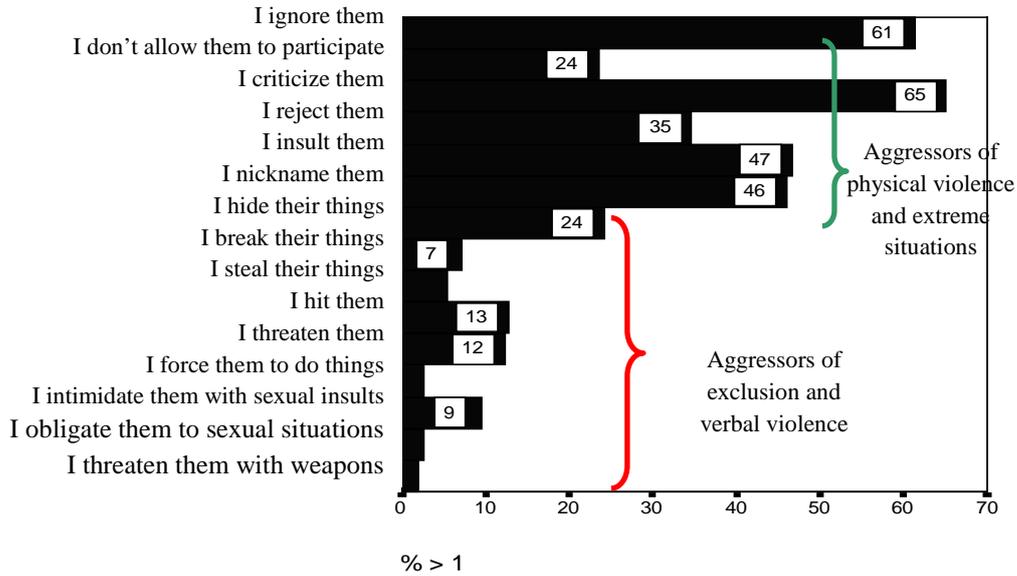


Figure 3 Percentages of aggressors

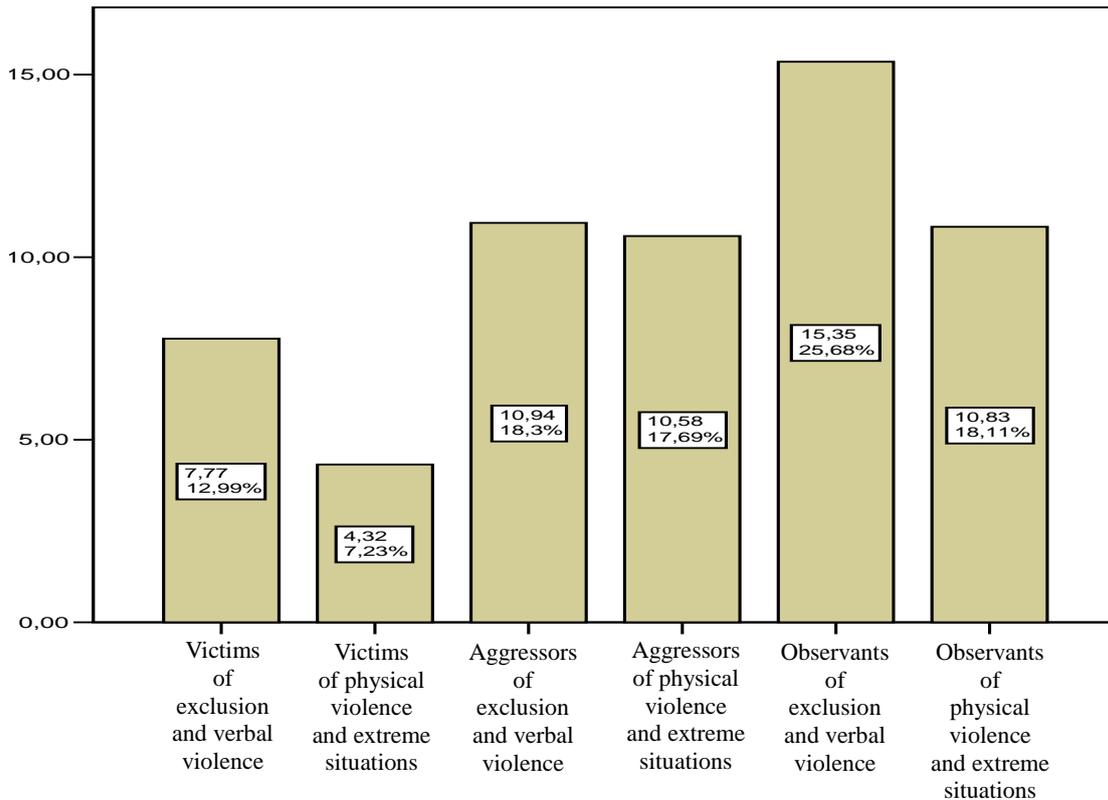


Figure 4 Victims, aggressors and observers means, in the factorial factors

From Figure 4, we can see, the number of aggressors and observants are higher than the number of victims. This result could reveal that these situations are not hidden, even happen in front of the rest of the students. Groups are highly involved, and these situations are witnessed by the rest of the classroom.

In order to analyze the sociometric status, and compare the results with the different roles evaluated, a factor analysis was also run with this measure (Promax). The obtained factors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Factor analysis results

Items	Factors		
	1	2	3
The one who ...			
Has a lot of friends	0.344	0.469	
Has few friends			0.884
Gets on very well with teachers		0.485	
Gets on badly with teachers	0.753		
Is nice		0.640	
Isn't nice	0.478		0.322
Understands the others		0.687	
Doesn't understand the others	0.483		0.422
Is aggressive	0.790		
Knows how to solve conflicts		0.713	
Helps others		0.718	
Doesn't know how to help others	0.685		
Knows how to communicate		0.669	
Doesn't know how to communicate			0.885
Is insecure			0.541
Feels as a failure			0.699
Feels superior	0.713		
Keeps catching others attention	0.755		

Note: Punctuations under 0.30 have been eliminated.

The first and the third factors gather the positive attributes, while the second factor groups the positives. The three factors together explain 49%-94% of the variance. The three factors can be explained in this way: (1) feeling superior attributes (s/he has a lot of friends, gets on badly with teachers, is not nice, does not understand the others, is aggressive, and does not know how to help others, feels superior, and keeps catching others attention), with a high consistency of the seven items, a 0.81 alpha punctuation (CI 95%: 0.80-0.83), and correlations between item and subscale are 0.543 (6th item) and 0.768 (9th item); (2) positive attributes (s/he has a lot of friends, gets on very well with teachers, is nice, understands the others, knows how to communicate, knows how to solve conflicts, helps others), the consistency of the seven items is 0.74 alpha punctuation (CI 95%: 0.72-0.76), and correlations between item and subscale are 0.452 (3rd item) and 0.714 (10th item); and (3) inferiority attributes (s/he has few friends, doesn't know how to communicate, is insecure and feel as a failure), the consistency of the four items is 0.76 alpha punctuation (CI 95%: 0.74-0.77), and correlations between item and subscale are 0.585 (15th item) and 0.850 (2nd item). The correlation between the three factors is low. This result points out that the attributes are independent. It was also calculated the correlation between the factorial punctuation obtained through the

regression process and the sum process. They were all very high: over 0.97. This is the reason why the rest of the analyses were using these factors.

Analyzing the classroom peer elections and rejections, as it is shown in Figure 5, most of the students are well integrated: 40.7% are in the average status, and 26.3% are in the popular status. However, there are a third of the students, who are in a risk status, having integration problems: being rejected (17.1%), neglected (6.2%) or controversial (9.7%).

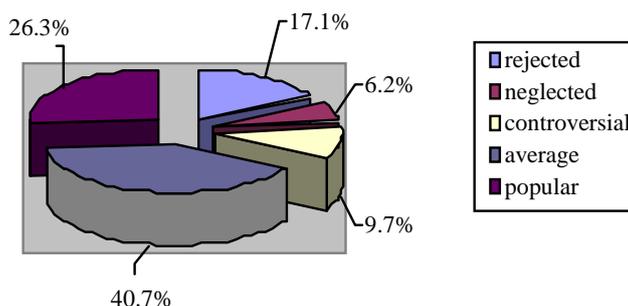


Figure 5 Percentages of the five sociometric status

Finally, in the last part of the results, the violence roles and the sociometric variables are going to be examined jointly. Analyzing the relation between the school violence roles and the peer nominations, there is just a significant statistically correlation between the rejections and being a victim of exclusion situations (0.238, $p < 0.01$), and between the elections and being an aggressor of physical violence and extreme situations (-0.248, $p < 0.01$).

The correlations between these roles and the attributes evaluated show a relation between: being victim of exclusion and having a few friends (0.277, $p < 0.01$), having problems to communicate (0.270, $p < 0.01$), feeling as a failure 0.226, $p < 0.01$); and between being aggressor of exclusion and verbal violence and getting on badly with teachers (0.173, $p < 0.01$) and being identified as an aggressive person by his/her peers (0.185, $p < 0.01$).

Finally, the relation between the sociometric status and the school violence roles were analyzed through an F-test (similar to the ones obtained with robust test), and the results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 Mean differences between the victim role and the sociometric status

		Square sum	fd	Square mean	F
Exclusion situations	Inter-groups	1374.022	4	343.505	31.251***
	Intra-groups	17718.568	1612	10.992	
	Total	19092.589	1616		
Verbal violence	Inter-groups	408.296	4	102.074	10.184***
	Intra-groups	16157.067	1612	10.023	
	Total	16565.363	1616		
Physical violence	Inter-groups	33.193	4	8.298	3.557**
	Intra-groups	3760.585	1612	2.333	
	Total	3793.778	1616		

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3 Games-Howell analysis: Victim role and sociometric status

	Sociometric status	N	Mean	SD	Error	IC 95%		Games-Howell
						limit inferior	limit superior	
Exclusion	Popular (1)	425	6.7887	2.508	0.1216	6.5496	7.0279	2 > 1, 3, 4, 5 1 < 3, 5
	Rejected (2)	277	9.6144	4.505	0.2707	9.0815	10.1473	
	Controversial(3)	157	7.8556	3.286	0.2623	7.3374	8.3737	
	Neglected (4)	100	7.6751	3.720	0.3720	6.9369	8.4134	
	Average (5)	658	7.5927	3.119	0.1216	7.3539	7.8314	
	Total	1617	7.7583	3.437	0.0854	7.5907	7.9260	
Verbal violence	Popular (1)	425	7.3191	2.631	0.1276	7.0683	7.5700	2 > 1, 3, 4
	Rejected (2)	277	8.7928	4.296	0.2581	8.2846	9.3010	
	Controversial(3)	157	7.6967	3.237	0.2584	7.1862	8.2071	
	Neglected (4)	100	8.0633	3.828	0.3828	7.3037	8.8229	
	Average (5)	658	7.5839	2.769	0.1079	7.3719	7.7959	
	Total	1617	7.7620	3.201	0.0796	7.6058	7.9182	
Physical violence	Popular (1)	425	4.1971	1.255	0.0609	4.0774	4.3169	2 > 1, 4
	Rejected (2)	277	4.5979	1.762	0.1058	4.3895	4.8063	
	Controversial(3)	157	4.4305	2.244	0.1791	4.0767	4.7844	
	Neglected (4)	100	4.3646	1.479	0.1479	4.0709	4.6582	
	Average (5)	658	4.2495	1.369	0.0533	4.1447	4.3544	
	Total	1617	4.3201	1.532	0.0381	4.2454	4.3949	

In Table 2, it is shown that there are statistically significant differences between being victim and the sociometric status. In Table 3, the Games-Howell test points out that the rejected is the sociometric status with higher mean compare with the other status, especially in exclusion situations. Related to the aggressor role, there are not significant differences between them.

4. Discussion

The results of this study, related to the frequency of violence situations in school contexts, are similar to those of different researchers in Spain (Ombudsman’s Office, 2000, 2006; Ortega, 2000; Díaz-Aguado, Martínez Arias & Martín Seoane, 2004): The more frequent victimization situations are verbal and exclusion, following by verbal aggressions and violence against properties. The percentages of adolescents that suffer the extreme violence situations (like sexual abuse or being threaten with arms) are lower, but the seriousness of these situations makes then very important. The aggressor role has a similar patron of results: The more frequent situations are verbal aggression and exclusion, violence against properties, and finally, extreme violence situations. Comparing the percentages of victims, aggressors and observants, we can conclude that groups are highly involved, and these situations are witnessed by the rest of the classroom. The aggressor can interpret the situation as something normal (nobody is doing anything to stop him/her). In this way, the aggressors justify their behavior, and they learn it as another way to cope with difficult situations (conflicts with peers, stressful moments). These inadequate social development will have consequences to the victims (self-esteem problems), to the aggressors

(they learn an aggressive way of relation with other, and they could generalize it to other situations: family, friends) and also to the observants (who could imagine themselves as the future victim or the future aggressor).

Analyzing the sociometric status of the students, it can be concluded that most of them are in an average status, followed by the popular. However, it is important to point out that a third of the students are having problems to integrate correctly in their peer classroom groups. Some of them are being neglected, rejected or they are controversial. Furthermore, analyzing the relation between the peer status and the school violence roles, it can be concluded that victims have a poor integration in their classes, as they are rejected more frequently than aggressors. This is a surprising result, as it seems as if the aggressors can count on their classroom peers more than the victims. Some previous studies speculate that being well liked by some classmates could help to explain why bullies continue in their negative behaviour. It may not matter to the bullies that they are (probably) disliked by their victims and the friends of their victims (if they have any), since they have their own friends (Boulton & Smith, 1994). It seems as if they provide mutual support and/or friendship. Such a phenomenon also has been reported even with a highly aggressive cohort (Cairns, Necherman, Gest & Garipey, 1988): "Even though highly aggressive children and adolescents were less popular than control subjects in the social network at large, they were equally often identified as being nuclear members of social clusters". This result pointed out those attempts to reduce bully/victim problems would need to acknowledge such a social support system, and work out ways of reducing this (Boulton & Smith, 1994). Given that (almost) all victimized children are also rejected, one can deduce that a lack of cooperative behaviour also play a central role in peer harassment (Shuster, 2001).

Finally, to conclude this section, it is important to mention the contribution and limitations of the present study. First of all, these findings allow us to have a punctual description of the Madrid's schools violence problems, so it can help to develop specific interventions. As Salmivalli (2001) proposes, conducting this kind of studies, we hope to shed some light on what happens at the social/psychological level, with respect to social roles, group norms, and cliques in school classes.

Limitations of this study are related to the necessity of longitudinal designs, in order to make causal inferences. This research, however, makes possible to provide initial information on school violence behaviours in Spain, where research on this problem is just starting. This study has explored the frequency of the school violence situations and the risk groups which are involved. This information is a necessary step towards tackling the problem. It is important that schools face up to the existence of violence, developing specific interventions, not only to cope the individual incidents when they occur, but also with preventive programs.

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