



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

School aggression in adolescence: Examining the role of individual, family and school variables



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KEYWORDS

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Abstract *Background/Objective:* The purpose of the present study was to analyse the role of family and classroom environments on the development of particular individual characteristics including level of empathy, attitude to institutional authority and perceived social reputation, and the mediational role these characteristics may play in school aggression. Relationships among variables were analysed by gender. *Method:* Participants in the study were 1,494 Mexican adolescents aged 12 to 18, 45% male, and drawn from six secondary schools. Structural equation models were calculated to test mediational effects among variables. *Results:* Findings obtained indicated that the level of empathy, the social reputation, and the attitude to authority mediated the relationship between the environment perceived by boys at home and school, and their aggressive behaviour at school. This mediation was partial for girls. *Conclusions:* Differences between genders and the importance of the adolescent-context interrelations in the explanation of their aggressive behaviour at school were discussed.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Adolescencia;
agresión escolar;
ambiente familiar;
ambiente escolar;
estudio ex post facto

Violencia escolar en adolescentes: un análisis del papel de variables individuales, familiares y escolares

Resumen *Antecedentes/Objetivo:* El propósito del presente estudio fue analizar el papel de los entornos familiares y del aula en el desarrollo de características particulares del adolescente, incluyendo el nivel de empatía, la actitud hacia la autoridad institucional y la reputación social percibida, y el papel mediador que estas características pueden desempeñar en la

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agresión escolar. Las relaciones entre las variables se analizaron en función del género. *Método:* Los participantes fueron 1.494 adolescentes mexicanos de 12 a 18 años, 45% varones, procedentes de seis escuelas secundarias. Se calcularon modelos de ecuaciones estructurales para probar efectos mediadores entre las variables. *Resultados:* Los resultados obtenidos indicaron que el nivel de empatía, la reputación social y la actitud hacia la autoridad mediaron la relación entre el ambiente percibido por los chicos adolescentes en la familia y en el aula y su comportamiento agresivo en la escuela. Esta mediación fue parcial para las chicas. *Conclusiones:* Se discuten las diferencias encontradas en función del género y la importancia de las interrelaciones adolescente-contexto en la explicación de su comportamiento agresivo en la escuela.

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Aggressive behaviour among secondary students has been identified as a serious problem in European and American countries (McClanahan, McCoy, & Jacobsen, 2015; Smith, 2016; Vega-Gea, Ortega-Ruiz, & Sánchez, 2016). In Latin America, specifically in Mexico, the recognition of this problem by educational authorities is much more recent (Martínez, 2014) and systematic studies are scarce (Castillo & Pacheco, 2008; Valadez, 2008; Valdés & Martínez, 2014). However, it seems that this behaviour is a significant problem in Mexico. Castillo and Pacheco (2008) used the same instrument as a study completed by the Ombudsman in Spain (Defensor del Pueblo, 2007), and found that prevalence rates in secondary schools were higher in Mexico. For example, 22.2% of Mexican adolescents claimed that some classmates hit them, compared to only 5.3% of adolescents in Spain. Likewise, in the most recent Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) Mexico has the highest percentage of physical injury caused by violence among secondary students (10.8%) and the second highest level of intimidation or verbal abuse (29.5%) after Sweden (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, 2014). As previously noted, despite societal concern and interest demonstrated by authorities, there are only few studies that have rigorously examined the explanatory factors of school aggression in Mexico.

Ecological systems theory applied to school aggression: family, school and individual level

Family and school environments have been consistently linked to aggression problems in adolescence in the international scientific literature (e. g. Estévez, Musitu, & Herrero, 2005; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Steffgen, Recchia, & Viechtbauer, 2013). Specifically, in a recent study on a Mexican sample carried out by Valdés and Martínez (2014) the impact of family and school environments on bullying behaviour in secondary students was studied through linear regression. The study found that both environmental climates were directly related to peer bullying behaviours which explain 74% of the variance.

This research lies within the framework of the ecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This framework understands violence as a relational phenomenon in which a range of variables interact. These vary in level from individual variables to macro-social ones. Fittingly, the analysis of school aggression needs to be analyzed while taking into account the progressive mutual adaptation of the characteristics of the developing adolescent and the properties of his or her immediate surroundings. The family and the school are the closest social contexts to a developing adolescent, making its interaction with the individual characteristics of the adolescent a key object of analysis.

In this line, prior studies suggest that characteristics of both environments, family and school, can be linked to individual factors that, in turn, are important predictors of aggressive behaviour. With respect to the family context, a negative family environment characterized by high levels of family conflict, poor or negative communication with parents, and lack of parental support has a negative effect on the development of particular social skills in children. These skills include the ability to anticipate the negative consequences of their behaviours for the victim, demonstrating low levels of empathy (Batanova & Loukas, 2014; Evans, Heriot, & Friedman, 2002; Van Noorden, Haselager, Cillessen, & Bukowski, 2015). Thus, the first aim of this study was to address the possible mediational effect of adolescents' level of empathy upon the relationship between family environment and aggressive behaviour.

As Emler (2009) suggests, the quality of relationships with parents is strongly linked to compliance with norms established by these informal authority figures. The author suggests that negative child-parent relationships may lead to a sense of disappointment in the child with respect to the parental figure and remarks that the same effect occurs depending on the quality of student-teacher relationships. A negative relationship with teachers, who are seen as the formal authority and protective figures at school, leads to the student's disappointment with these educational mentors. This perception of a lack of adult protection leads some adolescents in search

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