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Social and Emotional Competencies in Adolescents Involved in Different Bullying and Cyberbullying Roles

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ABSTRACT

Bullying and cyberbullying are extremely damaging violent behaviors present in schools. A promising research line focuses on social and emotional competencies in relation to bullying and cyberbullying. The aim of this study was to describe social and emotional competencies in Spanish adolescents in relation to age and gender and to find out if the level of social and emotional competencies was related to different bullying and cyberbullying roles. This study was conducted with a representative sample of 2139 adolescents enrolled in 22 schools. Social and emotional competencies differed by gender and age. Bullying and cyberbullying perpetrators and bully-victims scored low in social and emotional competencies. There was no significant difference between victims and uninvolved students. Controlling for age and gender, low social awareness and prosocial behavior were independently related to bullying perpetration and being a bully-victim. Low responsible decision making was related to being a bully-victim and being a cyberbully-cybervictim. These findings suggest that social and emotional competencies can protect adolescents against bullying and cyberbullying but future studies are needed to establish possible causal relationships between these competencies, bullying and cyberbullying.

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Competencias sociales y emocionales de adolescentes involucrados en diferentes roles de bullying y cyberbullying

RESUMEN

El *bullying* y el *cyberbullying* son comportamientos violentos extremadamente dañinos, presentes en las escuelas. Una línea de investigación prometedora se centra en las competencias sociales y emocionales en relación con el *bullying* y el *cyberbullying*. El objetivo de este estudio es describir las competencias sociales y emocionales de adolescentes españoles en relación con la edad y el sexo, y comprobar si el nivel de competencias sociales y emocionales se relaciona con diferentes roles de *bullying* y de *cyberbullying*. Este estudio se lleva a cabo con una muestra representativa de 2139 adolescentes matriculados en 22 escuelas. Se han encontrado diferencias en competencias sociales y emocionales por sexo y edad. Los agresores y agresores victimizados de *bullying* y *cyberbullying* puntúan bajo en competencias sociales y emocionales. No hay diferencias significativas entre las víctimas y los adolescentes no involucrados. Controlando el sexo y la edad, baja conciencia social y comportamiento prosocial están independientemente relacionados con ser agresor de *bullying* y con el rol de agresor victimizado. Puntuaciones bajas en la toma de decisiones responsables están relacionadas con ser agresor victimizado y ciberagresor victimizado. Estos resultados sugieren que las competencias sociales y emocionales pueden proteger a los adolescentes del *bullying* y del *cyberbullying*, pero estudios futuros son necesarios para establecer posibles relaciones causales entre estas competencias, el *bullying* y el *cyberbullying*.

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Introduction

Bullying is a frequent and long-term aggressive unjustified behavior in which some students intentionally attack other students (Smith & Brain, 2000). It is a complex social and psychological phenomenon with an imbalance of power between students who become perpetrators and their weaker peers who become victims (Ortega, 2010). Bullying is a serious problem in different geographic areas, settings and cultures (Smith, Kwak, & Toda, 2016) and the number of studies on the topic is increasing very quickly (Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015a). Nevertheless, there are still many gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed. Among them, one promising research approach focuses on variables that could potentially protect children and adolescents from being involved in bullying. Studies on these variables are still in their early stages.

Information and communication technology became a new context in which adolescents initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships with their peers. On the one hand, desirable use of technology is an opportunity to learn and relate to each other in a positive way (Ruiz, Del Rey, & Sánchez, 2012). On the other hand, electronic devices and the internet also became a context for a new form of aggressive behavior called cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined as bullying perpetrated frequently and repeatedly over time through electronic devices by students or groups on peers who cannot defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008).

Knowledge about variables that could potentially explain bullying and cyberbullying is still limited. One promising research approach focuses on association between bullying and social and emotional competencies (Zych, Farrington, Llorent, & Tfofi, 2017). After a series of studies conducted by Mayer and Salovey (1997) on emotional intelligence defined as the ability to perceive, understand, use and manage emotions in oneself and others, studies on a broader concept of social and emotional competencies emerged. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approach focused on competencies for life (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2009) including skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2012). Emotional competencies are understood as skills applied in a positive way to real life situations according to the needs of each moment (Saarni, 1999). Even though SEL core competencies for life are promoted in many programs (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), they are rarely measured and described in representative samples and gathered together in the same study.

There are still gaps in knowledge regarding relationships between social and emotional competencies, gender and age. A study conducted by Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, Muñoz-Morales, and Llorent (2018b) with university students showed that women scored higher than men in social awareness and relationships skills. There were no significant gender differences in self-awareness, self-management and motivation and decision making. Fernández-Berrocal, Cabello, Castillo, and Extremera (2012) reported that adult women scored higher than men in most of the scales of emotional intelligence but this relationship disappeared when controlling for age. A meta-analysis of 47 empirical studies on emotional intelligence in males and females (Joseph & Newman, 2010) showed that females scored higher than males in performance-based emotional intelligence tests. No gender differences were found in self-reported emotional intelligence and mixed (both self-reported and performance) measures. Thus, describing gender differences in representative samples is still necessary.

On the one hand, Salguero, Fernandez-Berrocal, Balluerka, and Aritzeta (2010) found positive small relationships between perceived emotional intelligence and age in adolescents aged between 12 and 17. On the other hand, literature reviews show that adolescence is a period in which self-perception and self-esteem

tend to decrease (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). A longitudinal study conducted by Cole et al. (2001) found that positive self-perception in domains such as academic, appearance and social increased with age in elementary school, decreased in early adolescence and later increased again. The number of studies on this topic is still low and findings regarding age and gender are inconsistent, possibly because social and emotional competencies were rarely studied as a comprehensive construct. Thus, the first objective of this study was to describe these competencies in adolescent boys and girls and the association between age and the level of social and emotional competencies. It was hypothesized that most of these competencies are higher in girls. Given the nature of these competencies (self-perception in social and emotional domains) relationship with age is expected to be negative.

Research on relationships between bullying, cyberbullying and social and emotional competencies is still in its relatively early stages (see a review by Zych et al., 2017). There is an open debate in the field on whether perpetrators are socially incompetent or socially skillful manipulators. On the one hand, Sutton, Smith, and Swettenham (1999a) suggested that bullies have good understanding of social situations and cues and are skillful in manipulating other children. In an empirical study, they found that perpetrators were skillful in understanding emotions and thoughts in a set of stories (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999b). On the other hand, Crick and Dodge (1999) argued that, as a whole, bullying is a socially incompetent behavior. Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) added that when social competence is defined as skills used in a positive way and prosocial relationships, bullies are considered low in social competence. This definition is also used in the current study. With a similar approach, Romera, Cano, García-Fernández, and Ortega-Ruiz (2016) found that self-perceived social competence was lower in cyberbullies and cyberbully-cyberbullies when compared to victims and uninvolved students. Gómez-Ortiz, Romera, and Ortega-Ruiz (2017) reported that victims, bullies and bully-victims showed lower social adjustment and social efficacy than uninvolved students, and that bullies and bully-victims showed lower prosocial behavior in comparison to uninvolved students.

A meta-analysis on empathy and bullying conducted by Zych, Tfofi, and Farrington (2016) showed that perpetrators of bullying score lower on empathy than non-perpetrators whereas victims have the same level of empathy as non-victims. Bully-victims show the lowest level of empathy. Another meta-analysis on empathy and cyberbullying (Zych, Baldry, Farrington, & Llorent, 2018a) found that also cyber-bullies score low on empathy whereas cyber-victims score the same as non-cyber-victims. Casas, Ortega-Ruiz, and Del Rey (2015) found that bullying victimization was predicted by higher level of emotional attention, less emotional clarity and repair whereas bullying perpetration was predicted by less emotional attention, clarity and repair. Garaigordobil (2017) reported that cyberbullying perpetration was predicted by low emotional attention, clarity and repair whereas cyberbullying victimization was predicted by higher emotional attention only. Baroncelli and Ciucci (2014) found that bullying and cyberbullying perpetration was related to difficulties in regulating emotions. Elipe, Ortega, Hunter, and Del Rey (2012) reported that involvement in bullying was predicted by higher emotional attention and lower repair and there was no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and cyberbullying. Eden, Heiman, and Olenik-Shemesh (2016) found that controlling and managing emotions predicted cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Many of these studies suggest that involvement in bullying and cyberbullying can be related to lower level of social and emotional competencies, but most of them focused only on some aspects of this construct. Thus, new research is needed to discover and understand these possible relationships.

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