



Functional profiles of school refusal behavior and their relationship with depression, anxiety, and stress



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ABSTRACT

Negative emotional states are common among youth with problematic school absenteeism, but little is known about their presence across different school refusal behavior profiles. The aim of this study was twofold: to identify different cluster solutions across functional profiles of school refusal behavior (I. Avoidance of Negative Affectivity, II. Escape from Social and/or Evaluative Situations, III. Pursuit of Attention, and IV. Pursuit of Tangible Reinforcement) and to determine whether these profiles differ from each other based on dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress. The sample consisted of 1582 Ecuadorian adolescents aged 12–18 years ($M = 14.83$; $SD = 1.86$) who completed the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R) and the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21). Latent class analysis revealed three school refusal profiles: non-school refusal behavior, school refusal behavior by tangible reinforcements, and school refusal behavior by multiple reinforcements. The last group displayed the most maladaptive profile and revealed highest mean scores on the three dimensions of the DASS-21 compared to other groups. To promote mental health in this group it is a necessary goal due to their link with these negative emotional states. Prevention measures to strengthen emotional self-regulation should be considered in these cases.

1. Introduction

School refusal behavior refers to youth who have difficulties attending classes or remaining in school (Kearney, 2001). The heterogeneous nature of this problem has led to multiple and significant efforts across decades to determine the characteristics of this population (Elliot and Place, 2017). Different taxonomic systems have been proposed to facilitate the understanding and classification of different subtypes of children and youth with school attendance problems (Kearney, 2016).

Different perspectives over many decades have been proposed to conceptualize school refusal behavior. Initial classification systems were proposed using demographic data, parental reports, and clinical observations to determine groups (Coolidge et al., 1957; Granell de Aldaz et al., 1987). However, these classification systems were limited by their non-empirical base, lack of inclusion of all cases of school absenteeism, and imprecise evaluation strategies. Empirical systems based on multivariate analyses (Atkinson et al., 1989; Kolvin et al.,

1984) and diagnostic models (Bernstein, 1991; Last et al., 1987; Last and Strauss, 1990) were subsequently proposed. These classification systems were based on the numerous forms of clinical symptoms that these youths display and revealed that separation anxiety, phobic, and mood disorders were commonly associated with this population (Bernstein and Garfinkel, 1986; Last and Strauss, 1990). Although these diagnostic systems have been applied in numerous studies, one of their main limitations is that they are commonly restricted to young people who refuse to attend school due to emotional disorders (e.g., anxiety, anxiety, fear, depression), what is known as school refusal. However, difficulty attending school or remaining in classes is a multifaceted problem.

The present study thus investigated school attendance problems understood as via the broader construct of school refusal behavior (Kearney and Albano, 2007). Kearney and Silverman (1990) proposed a functional approach as a classification model for school refusal behavior that covers a greater percentage of youth with school attendance problems. This model proposes four functional conditions that underlie

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school refusal behavior: 1) avoidance of school-based stimuli that provoke negative affectivity (e.g. distress, anxiety, depression), (2) escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations (e.g., tests, peer interactions), (3) pursuit of attention from significant others (e.g., parents), and/or (4) pursuit of tangible reinforcers outside of school (e.g., sleeping, playing video games). The first two factors refer to school refusal behavior based on negative reinforcement or to avoid aversive situations. The latter two factors refer to school refusal behavior based on positive reinforcement or obtain something positive outside the school (Kearney, 2002a). This functional approach is a classification system commonly utilized to assess school refusal behavior (Díaz-Herrero et al., 2018; Sanmartín et al., 2018).

The School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised was developed to measure the relative strength of these functional conditions for a particular case (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002b). The benefits of this system include greater attention to the substantial heterogeneity that characterizes cases with school refusal behavior (not only focused on anxiety-based school refusal), linkage to specific assessment and treatment strategies, and a specific measure for this model, the SRAS-R, with adequate psychometric properties supported in eight different countries (González et al., 2016, 2017, 2018; Haight et al., 2011; Heyne et al., 2016; Kim, 2010; Richards and Hadwin, 2011; Seçer, 2014; Walter et al., 2017).

1.1. Profiles derived from the functional model

Identifying school refusal behavior profiles is important to identify the psychological profile of these students and to delineate targeted assessment, prevention, and intervention efforts. Although previous research has identified profiles of children with severe school attendance problems (Berg et al., 1993; Bools et al., 1990) and truants (Maynard et al., 2012), only one study examined the school refusal behavior profiles based on the functional model (Dube and Orpinas, 2009). This study included 99 American students with school attendance problems aged 8–15 years. The analyses identified three profiles: a multiple school refusal behavior profile (17.2%) that combined explanatory factors characterized by positive and negative reinforcement, a school refusal behavior profile by positive reinforcement (60.6%), which only included factors related to parental attention or tangible rewards, and a non-school refusal behavior profile (22.2%). The authors noted that subsequent research should examine these profiles in other countries and utilize larger samples (Dube and Orpinas, 2009) and more precise statistical analyses such as latent class analysis (Schreiber, 2017). Defining more specific groups may aid in more targeted and efficient interventions (Park et al., 2015).

1.2. School refusal behavior and negative emotional states

Students with school attendance problems appear likely to have emotional difficulties (Havik et al., 2015). Depression and anxiety are considered the most common emotional difficulties for students who do not attend school (Nayak et al., 2018). However, great heterogeneity in diagnoses marks this population (Romani et al., 2017). Kearney and Albano (2004) found, among 143 American youth, that the most common diagnoses across the four functions of school refusal behavior were anxiety-related diagnoses regarding negatively reinforced school refusal behavior, separation anxiety disorder regarding attention-seeking behavior, and oppositional defiant and conduct disorder regarding pursuit of tangible reinforcement outside of school. Dube and Orpinas (2009) found, among their sample of elementary and middle school students with attendance problems, that students with negatively and positively reinforced school refusal behavior obtained higher scores in behavioral difficulties, were more frequently victimized, and experienced more traumatic or stressful events compared with those with positively reinforced school refusal behavior and no profile of school refusal behavior.

These studies, while useful, have largely involved Caucasian samples and generally indicate no major cultural differences among the results. A recent study from multi-ethnic Ecuador reaffirmed the psychometric properties of the SRAS-R in an adolescent sample and confirmed that, school refusal behavior was significantly and positively correlated with different negative emotional states (e.g. anxiety, social anxiety, school anxiety, depression and stress) (González et al., 2018). Due to the small sample size in the studies about identification of school refusal behavior profiles and the little previous research regarding its relationship with emotional variables, however, further research remains needed in larger populations and different countries.

The present study thus sought to address these limitations with two main aims. The first aim was to verify whether there are different school refusal behavior profiles with respect to the four functional conditions established by Kearney and Silverman (1990). The second aim was to examine differences between identified school refusal behavior profiles and their scores on dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress. The first hypothesis was that a latent class method would generate three school refusal behavior profiles (a multiple school refusal behavior profile, a positive reinforcement school refusal behavior profile, and a non-school refusal behavior profile) according to the results reported by Dube and Orpinas (2009). The second hypothesis was that an identified multiple profile of school refusal behavior would be associated with statistically significant higher scores in depression, anxiety, and stress (Heyne et al., 2016; Dube and Orpinas, 2009; Kearney, 2002b; Kearney and Silverman, 1993; Kearney and Albano, 2004; Walter et al., 2017).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Ecuadorian adolescents were recruited by random cluster sampling in 11 secondary education centers of Quito. The participation rate was high; only 3.6% of students were excluded due to lack of paternal consent and 2.1% were excluded due to omissions and mistakes in their answers. A normative sample of 1582 participants included 964 males and 618 females aged 12–18 years ($M = 14.83$; $SD = 1.86$). The majority of students came from urban areas (86.4%). Socio-economic distribution it was assessed according to the parent's level of academic qualification corresponding to school graduate (23%), secondary studies (56%) and university studies (17%).

2.2. Measures

School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R; Kearney, 2002b). The SRAS-R is a 24-item self-report measure with a 7-point Likert scale that assesses the relative influence of four functional conditions of school refusal behavior (I. Avoidance of stimuli that provoke negative affectivity; II. Escape from aversive social and/or evaluative situations; III. Pursuit of attention from significant others, and IV. Pursuit of tangible reinforcement outside of school). In this study, the Spanish version developed by González et al. (2016), whose levels of reliability range from 0.70 (factor I) to 0.87 (factor III), was used. The coefficients of internal consistency of this measure in this study were 0.74, 0.68, 0.81 and 0.67, respectively, for the four factors of the SRAS-R.

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21; Lovibond and Lovibond 1995). The DASS-21 is a self-report questionnaire with 21 items that measure depression, anxiety, and stress on a 4-point rating scale. In this study, the Spanish version provided by Fonseca et al. (2010), whose levels of reliability range from 0.73 (Anxiety) to 0.81 (Stress), was used. The coefficients of internal consistency of this measure in this study were 0.76 (Depression), 0.75 (Anxiety) and 0.75 (Stress).

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