

## Article

# Study of the Relationship of Bullying with the Levels of Eudaemonic Psychological Well-Being in Victims and Aggressors

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**Abstract:** Bullying has a negative impact on adolescents' emotional and social development, especially in the case of victims. This study aims to explore the association of engagement in bullying behaviours, for both the victim and aggressor, with psychological well-being. A non-experimental, cross-sectional and correlational quantitative study was designed, with the participation of 570 students between 14 and 15 years old (SD 0.99), of which 50.5% were girls and 49.5% boys, who were selected through stratified random sampling. Mean differences, bivariate correlations and multiple linear regressions were calculated to study the relationship between bullying and psychological well-being. Victims scored lower for subjective well-being, with the educational and social implications that this means. As for the aggressors, who scored higher on well-being than non-aggressors, the question is raised as to whether well-being increases with aggression or whether aggression is the result of lower levels of well-being. Female bullying victims belonging to the older age group are the participant profile with the lowest well-being scores. This gender perspective can be considered not only with regards to coexistence and bullying prevention plans but also shows the need to promote psychological well-being to educate towards equality.

**Keywords:** bullying; victim; aggressor; adolescents; subjective well-being



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Bullying

Bullying is a prolonged aggressive behaviour of verbal insults, social rejection, psychological intimidation and physical aggression from children towards other children, thereby making them victims of their peers. A pupil is bullied or becomes a victim when exposed, repeatedly and over a period of time, to negative actions by one or more of their peers [1]. In this first definition, the three characteristics that must necessarily be present to refer to bullying are: that it is an intentional harmful conduct that occurs under an imbalance of social power; that it is repeated over time; and that it includes different types of violence, such as verbal, physical, psychological violence, or other forms such as cyberbullying, sexual harassment or discrimination that have been added over time.

Since that first definition, several different definitions have emerged, all of which explicitly include the three conditions mentioned above. Bullying is conceptualised as '(1) intentional negative behaviour that (2) typically occurs with some repetitiveness and is (3) directed against a person who has difficulty defending himself or herself' [1], according to this information, power relations are always present in different social groups, and the exact definition of what constitutes this abuse of power will depend on the social and cultural context and, consequently, the classification of a situation as bullying or not.

Alongside the development of the study on bullying, changes have arisen in the reality of pupils and educational centres, giving rise to new forms of bullying, such as “cyberbullying” or “cyber victimization”. This is an aggressive and intentional act (generally threats and insults) carried out repeatedly and constantly over time through electronic communication tools or interactive technologies such as chats, videos posted on the internet, social networks, instant messaging via mobile phones, and others, by a group or an individual against victims who cannot easily defend themselves. These new forms aggravate the situation as they extend bullying beyond the school day.

Three basic positions can be identified from which to engage in a bullying situation:

*Bullying victims.* In Spain, adolescent victims reach 24.56%, where 6% of the population has been assaulted with weapons or other physical tools [2], victims are those students who are on the receiving end of bullying. They are considered the lowest in school status by their peers and are generally the least popular at school [3]. According to their reaction to bullying, victims can be classified as passive or submissive and active, aggressive or provocative. Passive victims are usually sensitive and calm people, with a negative view of themselves and their situation. They often see themselves as unsuccessful, showing increased insecurity and low self-esteem. Some do not understand the reason for the harassment they are subjected to, while others attribute it to personal characteristics such as obesity, disability, ethnic origin or socioeconomic status, making them different from the vast majority. They do not react to the harassment received, although they may show their fear and manifest their vulnerability and pain (Cano Echeverri and Vargas-González, 2018). On the contrary, active, aggressive or provocative victims respond violently to bullying and usually conform to a combination of anxiety and aggressive reaction patterns. The reaction of this type of victim can become the justification for the bullying by the initial aggressor or others, thus forming a vicious cycle of mistreatment and humiliation [3]. Students among this type of victim often have concentration problems, and their behaviour can cause irritation and distress in their environment.

*Aggressors.* Usually, aggressors or bullies come from family environments with difficulties in teaching their children to respect limits and rules, combining excessive permissiveness towards inappropriate and even antisocial behaviour and the use of very authoritarian methods, including physical punishment [4]. They tend to be characterised by impulsivity, lack of control, aggressiveness, absence of feelings, little empathy, and authoritarian leadership. All these behaviours are usually displayed in front of their peers, who may be from the same group or class, or an older student, who takes advantage of the imbalance of power in their favour, seeking to harass those who are in lower grades, and sometimes even adults, such as teachers themselves [3,5]. These types of actors feel the need for power and dominance, to be in control and to control others, and they usually have peers, who are generally influenceable people with a need for social approval, who celebrate and support their actions, and who become co-bullies. They usually come from family environments with difficulties teaching their children respect. We can find three types of aggressors [4]: leader aggressors, those students who begin the aggression in bullying situations between peers. Through successful social skills and popularity in the group, they manage to organise or manipulate others to comply with their orders and hide under a leadership appearance, supported by their group; follower aggressor, those students who do not initiate the aggression, but who join the leader aggressor; and finally, the bystander aggressor, those students who participate in the situation by encouraging the aggressors and mocking the victim.

*Bystanders.* Those students who participate as mere observers and witnesses and who are thus passively present before the acts of bullying. They do not intervene, mediate, report or defend the bullied victim during these acts and thus become an accomplice. They often justify their passive actions towards bullying, explaining that it is not their problem and that sometimes they may be desensitised to the events, regardless of their cruelty.

There are two basic types of bystanders: defensive or active bystanders, who are students who help or try to defend the victim; and passive bystanders, students who do not

get involved in the situation [2,4]. In the latter, a distinction is made between those who are aware of the situation but do not intervene and those who are not aware of the situation.

### 1.2. Well-Being: Objective Well-Being and Subjective Psychological Well-Being

A first approach to the classification or differentiation between the various forms of well-being is the proposal to establish two differentiated types of well-being: objective well-being and subjective psychological well-being.

The present study focuses on a specific form of well-being, subjective well-being, which can be of three types [6]: eudaimonic, hedonic and experiential or evaluative. Eudaimonic well-being focuses on the experience of personal functioning and the pursuit of meaningful goals and self-fulfilment [7]. The hedonic approach includes affective and cognitive elements, which relate to the balance of positive and negative emotions, and an overall evaluation of life, expressed in life satisfaction [6]. Finally, the experiential perspective refers to each person's overall assessment of their general well-being. These are all different ways of approaching the study of "subjective well-being", although this grammatical construct is usually used to refer only to hedonic subjective psychological well-being [7].

As for objective well-being, while not the subject of this paper, it refers to the external conditions of life, which can be measured by a wide variety of statistical indicators, such as material resources, risk behaviour and the living environment [8].

### 1.3. The Current Study

Adolescence is an important period in which many personal changes take place and have to be faced, as well as new family, academic and social situations. How adolescents react and adapt to these circumstances is directly related to their level of subjective well-being [9].

One of these situations, which is becoming more and more frequent in adolescence, is bullying, which has been present for as long as schools have existed [10]. However, it has been identified and discussed relatively late [8,10] and has a higher involvement and participation rate among adolescents, even though it seems to appear at earlier ages [9,10]. Bullying has a negative impact on adolescents' social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural development [11].

Among the different actors that appear in bullying situations, the victims of this type of violence present the greatest difficulties and problems related to their involvement in bullying situations. These difficulties can appear in the academic (low performance, absenteeism, dropping out of school), physical (hitting, scratching, pushing, among others) and psychological (low self-esteem and well-being, depression, social isolation and in some cases even suicide) areas [12]. The victim role is statistically related to internalizing and externalizing problems [13], including low psychological well-being and social adjustment and high levels of psychological stress [14]. It also increases the risk of depression, anxiety and suicide attempts [15]). Ninety-four percent of victims suffer psychological sequelae after being bullied, including effects on their psychological well-being [16]

Studies have also reported that participation in bullying situations negatively affects the psychological well-being of victims and perpetrators [17], given that various dimensions of psychological well-being are related to the different forms of bullying [18].

This study addresses the relationship between bullying and a specific, eudaimonic, type of well-being and aims to find an answer to the research question: what is the relationship between subjective well-being and participation in bullying situations?

## 2. Objective and Hypotheses

The present study aims to explore the association of engagement in bullying behaviours, for both victim and aggressor, with psychological well-being, given the relevance of well-being for the individual and, in addition, given the relationship between well-being

and other purely academic variables such as school performance and school dropout and failure [19].

The following hypotheses have been developed in line with these objectives:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *There is a statistically significant and negative relationship between involvement in bullying as aggressors and perceived psychological well-being and that individuals involved in bullying situations as aggressors score significantly lower on well-being than individuals who are not involved in bullying situations as aggressors.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *There is a statistically significant and negative relationship between involvement in bullying situations as victims and perceived psychological well-being, and that individuals who participate in bullying situations as victims score significantly lower on well-being than individuals who are not involved in bullying situations.*

### 3. Materials and Methods

To select the sample, a stratified probability cluster sampling process was implemented (type of centre, centre and courses). A total of 613 students from eight secondary schools (four public and four subsidised) in Teruel (which in 2020 had approximately 1300 students in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th years of compulsory secondary education or ESO) participated, of which 570 completed the questionnaire correctly. Boys made up 282 (49.5%), and girls 288 (50.5%) of the participants. The age of the participants was between 13 and 15 years ( $M = 14.43$ ;  $SD = 0.99$ ), distributed by year: 234 in 2nd ESO (41.1%), 144 in 3rd ESO (25.3%) and 192 in 4th ESO (33.7%). The selected sample allowed us to work with a confidence level of 95% and assume an error of 4.05%.

The 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades of ESO were selected as these are the ones identified as having the highest number of bullying situations [20].

A three-section questionnaire was constructed:

*Socio-demographic data.*

The first section of the questionnaire collected socio-demographic data (name and type of centre) and the controlled variables: gender, age and grade.

*Flourishing Scale* [21] in its Spanish version [22].

In the second section of the questionnaire, the *Flourishing Scale* [20] (in its Spanish version [22]) was used to assess the participants' perception of well-being, which was the dependent variable. This scale was a brief, 8-item test focused on relationships (items 1, 2), self-esteem (items 3, 4), life purposes (items 5, 6) and optimism (items 7, 8). Using a Likert-type scale with response options between 1 and 7, respondents indicated their level of agreement with each of the statements (e.g., I am optimistic about my future). The total score was obtained from the sum of the items, and lower scores indicated individuals with fewer resources, strengths and a more negative perception of their well-being. The internal consistency, evaluated through the Cronbach alpha coefficient, was 0.84. The test-retest coefficient was 0.71. Convergent validity was adequate, and correlations with comparative tests were strong and positive (higher than 0.71 in all cases). Divergent validity was adequate, and correlations with comparative tests were strong and negative (higher to  $-0.73$ ).

*Multimodal School Interaction Questionnaire (CMIE-III)* [23].

The third section collects information about involvement in bullying situations, the independent variable, through the third version of the *Multimodal School Interaction Questionnaire (CMIE-III)* [23]. This instrument consists of 42 items, of which 36 can be answered on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 4 depending on the number of times they have experienced each of the situations described in the questionnaire in the last two months, ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often), and assesses five factors: Bullying behaviour (aggressor) (items 1–10), victimisation received (victim) (items 11–20), active bystander defending the victim (items 21–25), extreme bullying/cyberbullying (26–33) and passive bystander (items 33–36); the following six items are of personal choice, in which respondents must select (being able to indicate more than one at a time) those places where bullying situations

usually take place. Consistency of this scale is adequate ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), convergent validity is adequate, correlations with comparative tests are strong and positive (higher than 0.75 in all cases).

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. This research design has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Autonomous Community of Aragon (CEICA). Once the approval was obtained, each of the local secondary schools was contacted via an e-mail that explained the aim of the study and the questionnaire that was intended to be administered to students in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades of compulsory secondary education. Furthermore, authorisation forms for participation in the study were enclosed for the school management team, class tutors, and the participants' families, as the participants were minors. The authorisations addressed to the families of the participating minors explicitly state that participation is voluntary and anonymous in all cases.

Once the signed authorisations had been received from each centre, a first meeting was arranged to provide information on the procedure and instructions for administering the questionnaire, as it was not possible to attend the information-gathering sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each tutor was responsible for collecting and delivering the questionnaires to the management team at their centre, who forwarded the information to us.

Firstly, the sample was described by calculating statistics and frequencies. Given the nature of the scales used, it was necessary to draw the variables under study from the items of these scales. For the normality of the sample, both the results found in the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (Sig. 0.24) and those found in the Shapiro–Wilks test (Sig. 0.31) describe a normal distribution. The homogeneity of variance was calculated through Levene's test. The differences between means were calculated with the Student's *t*-test, the relationship between variables was calculated with Pearson's bivariate correlations, and the independent variable's predictive capacity on the dependent variable was calculated through the linear regression test.

During the study, a statistically significant correlation was detected between the aggressor and victim variables and the correlation between age, grade and subjective well-being, as well as significant differences between ages and grade in well-being. Therefore, a multiple linear regression test was also used to analyse the possible interaction of the independent variables in the results obtained in the dependent variable.

Finally, since the scale used to measure bullying does not establish cut-off points from which a participant can be evaluated as an aggressor, victim, non-aggressor or non-victim, the continuous variables aggressor and victim were categorised following previous studies, and specific cut-off points were established for each of these cases by calculating quartiles and selecting the first one [24]. The cut-off points established were: aggressors ( $\geq 1.01$ ), non-aggressors ( $< 1.01$ ), victims ( $\geq 1.03$ ) and non-victims ( $< 1.03$ ).

All data collected during this study were processed and analysed using the statistical software *IBM SPSS Statistics* (v. 24) in Ciudad Real, Spain.

#### 4. Results

The results arranged and grouped according to the hypotheses are presented below. The results shown in Table 1 show that aggressors score higher on well-being than non-aggressors while non-victims score higher than victims. Catching our attention was the fact that non-aggressors obtain the lowest score in well-being, even below victims, while non-victims score the highest on well-being. In relation to sex, boys score higher on well-being than girls, which seems to indicate that non-aggressor and victim girls are those who obtain lower scores on well-being. These mean differences are statistically significant in all cases. The size of the effect of aggressor and victim on well-being is medium although greater in the case of victim.

**Table 1.** Comparison of means for well-being.

		Gender		Aggressor		Victim	
		Male	Female	Yes	No	Yes	No
Well-Being	N	282	286	453	117	462	108
	Mean	1.50	1.36	2.993	2.742	2.867	3.266
Levene's Test	F	1.096		4.881		1.356	
	Sig.	0.296		0.141		0.087	
<i>t</i> -test	<i>t</i>	6.831		2.242		−3.758	
	<i>d</i>	0.18		0.23		0.63	
	<b>Sig.</b> <b>(2-tailed)</b>	<b>0.000</b>		<b>0.024</b>		<b>0.000</b>	

Note. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The results shown in Table 2 show the existence of a positive, although weak, relationship between well-being and aggression. These results (Table 2) also present a negative, and moderate, relationship between well-being and victim of bullying. Finally, a negative relationship has been found between course, age and well-being. These correlations are statistically significant. Effect sizes of victim, age and degree on well-being are medium, the victim effect is the greatest. The size of the aggressor effect on well-being is small.

**Table 2.** Pearson correlations between the variables of well-being, aggressor, victim, age and grade.

	Well-Being	Aggressor	Victim	Age	Grade
Well-Being	1				
Aggressor	<b>0.095 *</b>	1			
Victim	<b>−0.3450 **</b>	<b>0.359 **</b>	1		
Age	<b>−0.1790 **</b>	0.113	−0.060	1	
Grade	<b>−0.2440 **</b>	0.010	−0.010	<b>0.834 **</b>	1

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results shown in Table 3 indicate that well-being decreases with age and, also, with the promotion to higher courses. The size of the effect of the course and age on well-being is small or very small.

The results in Table 4 show that the concurrence of the victim, degree and aggressor variables predicts with greater probability the possibility of obtaining the lowest scores in well-being. The ability to predict victim, grade and aggressor about well-being is statistically significant. The size of the effect of the joint appearance of independent variables on well-being (independent variable) is medium.

**Table 3.** ANOVA comparison of means in well-being according to grade and age.

		N	Mean		Mean Differences	Sig.	Eta Squared
Grade	2nd ESO	234	3.300	3º ESO	0.641	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.11</b>
				4º ESO	0.578	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.14</b>
	3rd ESO	144	2.658	2º ESO	−0.641	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.11</b>
				4º ESO	−0.063	0.832	0.08
	4th ESO	192	2.272	2º ESO	−0.578	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.14</b>
				3º ESO	0.063	0.832	0.08

Table 3. Cont.

		N	Mean		Mean Differences	Sig.	Eta Squared
Age	13	117	3.179	14	0.018	0.999	0.06
				15	0.568	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.12</b>
				16	0.354	0.60	0.05
	14	186	3.161	13	−0.082	0.999	0.06
				15	0.550	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.11</b>
				16	0.336	<b>0.046</b>	<b>0.12</b>
	15	171	2.612	13	−0.568	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.12</b>
				14	−0.550	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.11</b>
				16	−214	0.357	0.06
	16	96	2.826	13	−354	0.060	0.05
				14	−336	<b>0.046</b>	<b>0.12</b>
				15	0.214	0.357	0.06

Note. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4. Multiple regression: well-being, victim, aggressor and grade.

Model	R	R Squared	F	Sig.
1	0.345 <sup>a</sup>	0.119	76.566	<b>0.000</b>
2	0.426 <sup>b</sup>	0.182	62.958	<b>0.000</b>
3	0.454 <sup>c</sup>	0.206	48.884	<b>0.000</b>

<sup>a</sup> Predictors: (Constant), victim. <sup>b</sup> Predictors: (Constant), victim, grade. <sup>c</sup> Predictors: (Constant), victim, grade, aggressor.

## 5. Discussion

The results allow us to answer our research question and understand the relationship between participation in situations of bullying, both for the a victim and the aggressor, and we have been able to explore the association of engagement in bullying behaviours with psychological well-being, again for both victim and aggressor, which was our main aim.

Contrary to the hypotheses formulated, aggressors scored significantly higher in well-being than non-aggressors and a positive correlation has been found between aggression and well-being, which means that H1 is rejected. These results have also been found previously in different studies and show that higher scores on adolescents' subjective well-being are related, among other things, to the feeling of group belonging, which is one of the traits that characterise the role of aggressor [5]. High levels of well-being reported by aggressors could be because the questionnaires used were self-reports, as in the present study, as could the low level of self-criticism shown by aggressors [5,25]. The fact that a positive, albeit weak, relationship between aggression and well-being appears raises the question about the meaning of this relationship, since we cannot specify whether well-being increases with aggression or, on the contrary, low levels of well-being promote aggression [7,20,25]. As for the bullying victims, the results found in this study show a negative relationship between well-being and people involved in bullying situations as victims and that they score significantly lower in well-being than people who are not victims. These results imply that H2 has been confirmed in the present study. According to other studies, these results are due to the fact that the victims of bullying are the ones who are most affected by it and that this situation can have a negative impact at the academic, physical and psychological levels [18,24]. In this sense, different works also note the negative impact that being involved as a victim in bullying situations has on emotional and psychological well-being [11].

On the other hand, involvement in bullying situations is one of the variables that will affect the well-being of aggressors and victims [9] and, despite the fact that this study, in finding that aggressors score higher in well-being than non-aggressors, contradicts those that indicate that the well-being of aggressors and victims is lower than that of people who

do not take part in bullying situations, this relationship and condition do appear among the variables studied.

According to the data found in this study, victims report lower psychological well-being scores than non-victims. This has also been found in several other studies [13,14], which confirms the negative impact that bullying has on the psychological well-being of victims.

Subjective well-being was found to be affected to a greater extent when certain independent variables were present simultaneously rather than when the influence of each of them was measured separately. According to the results of this study, female students in the 4th grade of ESO aged 15 who are victims of bullying are those with the lowest average well-being scores.

These data place girls at a disadvantage, in this case in terms of well-being scores, compared to those of boys. A gender component in bullying situations makes boys and girls participate differently when involved in them, as this type of violence is also conditioned by sexist attitudes, given that the information found indicates that boys participate more in bullying situations as aggressors not because of the biological fact of being a boy but because of their higher scores in sexism [4].

Moreover, these results are consistent with the definition of well-being as a multidimensional category that does not depend exclusively on a single variable [6,11]. On the other hand, involvement in bullying situations is another variable that girls and boys will probably have to deal with for the first time during adolescence and, therefore, it will also affect the well-being of aggressors and victims [9], although not in an entirely isolated or independent way from the other variables that occur in their lives and not in the same way for male or female victims and aggressors.

There is evidence for the protective role of psychological well-being in bullying situations, both as victim and aggressor [24], which suggests that the relationship between bullying and well-being could be bidirectional. In this study, the results show a one-way relationship, where bullying affects well-being, especially that of victims.

Finally, this study has some limitations that may be distorting its findings: firstly, the nature of the scale used to measure bullying, which is self-report and without specific cut-off points, may generate difficulties with the reported responses and with how the variables are categorised to study differences in means between groups. Furthermore, it is not possible to establish the meaning of the relationship between the variables studied given the information collected, as it is a specific type of design that does not allow these conclusions to be drawn. In this sense, it seems necessary to develop experimental (or quasi-experimental) studies to establish the meaning of the relationship between well-being and bullying and, also, longitudinal studies to learn more about this relationship and its changes over time.

It is important to study the relationship between the variables in greater depth and identify other variables that may be conditioned by bullying, which may also prove to be protective factors against involvement in bullying situations. Finally, it is also necessary to study the impact of prevention and intervention plans according to the different variables and contents included in their implementation.

## 6. Conclusions

Firstly, according to the results, it is worth noting that aggressors score higher in well-being than non-aggressors, results observed previously in other studies and justified by the relationship between the role of aggressor and the belonging to the group. This information should not be overlooked in the construction of prevention programmes, nor should we ignore the well-being that aggressors may feel when committing the aggression, which could reinforce their behaviour and complicate the process of eradicating bullying. Moreover, if victims experience a reduction in their well-being due to their involvement in bullying situations then the need to promote well-being in schools seems to become



even more relevant, enabling aggressors to no longer need aggression to experience this well-being and so that potential victims can develop their own psychological well-being.

On the other hand, the fact that girls score significantly lower on well-being than boys puts them at a disadvantage. The relationship between bullying and sexism and how these sexist attitudes condition the different types of bullying behaviour cannot be ignored. This study shows that girls in the 4th grade of ESO who are victims of bullying are the profile with the lowest average scores in psychological well-being. This gender perspective can be considered not only for coexistence and bullying prevention plans but also shows the need to promote psychological well-being to educate towards equality.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Autonomous Community of Aragon (PI21-053).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Ethics approvals/waivers covered the individual schools where interventions were performed. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to not be authorized to make them public.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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