

# The incidence of peer bullying as multiple maltreatment among Spanish secondary school students

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## ABSTRACT

Two national reports on peer bullying and social exclusion in schools promoted by the Spanish Ombudsman and UNICEF (2000, 2007) established the state of the art of bullying incidence in secondary schools, its forms, and differences according gender, school year or type of school amongst the many aspects tackled by both studies. One more step in the deepening into the nature of peer bullying and social exclusion in schools is to clarify whether the students who are victims of bullying are so in a single way, i.e. through the same type of action or whether they are bullied in multiple forms. The present study aims first at finding out the existence of multiple bullying among the secondary school students participating in the Second Ombudsman's Report. Second to determine whether it consists of experiencing various behaviors within the same category, e.g. verbal bullying, or various behaviors across categories (e.g. being insulted and stolen), as well as the incidence of both types of multiple maltreatment. For that new analysis of the information provided by the 3000 participants are carried out. Only the perspective of victims are presented pointing to the existence of multiple maltreatment, especially across categories.

*Key words:* incidence of bullying, school bullying, multiple maltreatment.

## RESUMEN

Dos informes nacionales sobre acoso y exclusión social en la escuela promovidos por el Defensor del Pueblo, en colaboración con UNICEF (2000,2007), mostraron el grado de incidencia de estos dos tipos de maltrato en la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria, las modalidades en que se manifiesta, y las diferencias en incidencia en función del género, el curso y el tipo de centro. El estudio pretende aclarar si los estudiantes víctimas son acosados o excluidos sólo de una forma o de varias formas a la vez. El estudio tiene como objetivo principal establecer el grado en que el acoso entre los estudiantes de secundaria se dio de forma múltiple. También determinar el grado en el que el maltrato es múltiple dentro de la misma categoría o se produce a través de varias categorías diferentes (i.e.: que insulten y roben). Se llevaron a cabo nuevos análisis de la información obtenida por los 3000 participantes del estudio mencionado. En este artículo sólo presentamos la incidencia del multimaltrato desde la perspectiva de las víctimas.

*Palabras clave:* incidencia del acoso, acoso escolar, maltrato múltiple.

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\*Correspondence to the first author: Departamento de Psicología Evolutiva y de la Educación, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Cantoblanco, 28049 Madrid, España. E-mail: hector.gutierrez@uam.es. This study presents new analysis of data for the Second Ombudsman's-UNICEF Report on School Violence, co-funded by the Spanish *Defensor del Pueblo* [Ombudsman's Office] and the Comité Español UNICEF [Spanish Commission for UNICEF] through the UAM-UNICEF Institute for Children's and Adolescents' Needs and Rights (IUNDIA). The report was elaborated by the authors together with Esperanza Ochaita, M<sup>a</sup> Ángeles Espinosa and Elena Martín.

Bullying relationships are usually defined as aggressive behaviors or intentional "harm doing" typically carried out repeatedly over time within the framework of interpersonal (usually group) relationships characterised by an imbalance of power.

Scientific and social attention to bullying, particularly in schools, has increased during the last decades since the first studies of Olweus. This meeting is one more example of the countless actions to deep into its nature and into the ways to counteract their negative consequences for the daily life in schools. In the schedule of social attention, incidence studies are usually the first action-taking place. Nevertheless, despite the interest in determining the severity of peer victimization in schools, resulting in many survey studies, few have explored the issue through representative samples in a country, and even fewer longitudinal studies have been carried out.

The review coordinated by Smith *et al.* (1999) shows that despite Olweus' strong influence, especially among European researchers, on the instrument used to study the incidence of bullying, few national studies have been done. Most studies were based on data from schools of a particular town or a particular geographical area. Some of them consisted of comparisons between towns in different regions of a country. In Spain, after the pioneering studies conducted by Fernández (Vieira, Fernández & Quevedo, 1989) and Ortega (1997), the first survey at a national-scale on school bullying was developed in 1999 (Defensor del Pueblo-UNICEF, 2000). The results provided detailed data of the forms of victimization experienced, done or witnessed by students, and their different incidence among boys and girls; along the different grade-years and the type of school (state/private). A second study was carried out in 2006 in order to explore the possible changes in the incidence of bullying. The results point to a decrease in the percentage of self-recognised victims and aggressors of certain types of bullying, while others remain in similar percentages after seven years (Defensor del Pueblo-UNICEF, 2007; del Barrio, Martín, Montero, Gutiérrez, Barrios y de Dios, in press).

Along three decades of study on the phenomenon, the scope of behaviours considered to be bullying or power-abuse has increased from the direct physical bullying and verbal taunting, mainly performed by a group of bullies on the victim, as studied in the early studies (Olweus, 1978). Later on, indirect forms of bullying, either as physical aggression (aimed at one's belongings) or as verbal aggression (gossiping and spreading rumours), and social exclusion were added in most questionnaires (Galen & Underwood, 1997; Olweus, 1999a; Smith *et al.*, 2002).

Following Olweus' questionnaire, after a definition of bullying, students are usually asked whether they are victims or not. Those answering yes are then asked in which particular way they are bullied, usually using several behaviours in the same question, e.g. "Are you insulted, given nicknames, or are rumours spread about you?" "Are your belongings stolen, damaged or hidden?" On the contrary, in the Spanish instrument, the lack of a general question asking the participant if s/he has been bullied, taken as a basis for further questions, had the advantage of avoiding individual interpretations of the term bullying, but made very hard the comparison of Spanish data with data from other studies.

The first and more usual procedure poses more than one methodological problem. A first problem is the difficulty of finding one global term for all the forms of the

phenomenon in the various languages, as shown by a cross-linguistic study comparing children's and adolescents' use of different terms associated to different bullying episodes (Smith *et al.*, 2002). While it was found that even the term *bullying* was mainly used for direct physical interactions in which a power imbalance between characters is evident, scientific terms turned out not to fit the terms used by adolescents, and especially children.

A second methodological problem is derived from potential idiosyncratic interpretation of the term used in the questionnaire. As Smith *et al.* (2002) underline, to ask for each specific type of behaviour and not for a general term (victimization, maltreated, bullied, or other) as a basis to estimate victimization incidence prevents this problem of interpretation. That is, if a pupil is asked whether s/he is maltreated s/he could deny just because her/his idea of maltreatment (bullying) is limited to other aggressions than those experienced by him/herself. As it is hard for an adolescent to accept him/herself being a victim of others in the group probably a minimizing answer could be usual. The use of specific behaviours when finding out what is being suffered, done or observed, allows us to go beyond this interpretation. On the other hand, this procedure showed difficulties for the purpose of comparison with the incidence found in other studies, in which general terms have been used. In these studies, only when a general question (posed in terms of the participant identifying her/himself as victim or not) is answered affirmatively, the participant is asked about having experienced victimization in a variety of bullying behaviours. However, the particular categories used are often at a broad level, e.g. verbal aggression, which includes *insulting, name calling, rumours spreading*; or being target of attacks to one's belongings (*being robbed, having one's belongings hidden, having one's belongings damaged*).

Consequently there are two possible ways in which participants are asked about their victimization experiences in survey questionnaires as a means to estimate incidence of bullying. In one, participants are asked whether they are victims of bullying. Those who answer affirmatively are then asked in which particular form they suffer bullying. Usually more than one specific behaviour is included in one single question, suggesting an underlying broader category, e.g. "Have you been hit, pushed, kicked, taken or broken your belongings?" (suggesting physical aggressions). So, percentages of victims of specific behaviours are calculated from the number of those that previously admitted to be victims.

In the other procedure, the participants in the survey are presented with questions about specific behaviours of victimization, "How are you treated by your peers in school since the academic year started? Please circle one answer for each line in the following: I am ignored: never, sometimes, often, always; I am not allowed to participate; never," and so on.

Regarding the first procedure, a problem is the above mentioned variable interpretation of what is to be a victim of bullying. Moreover, the fact of finding all these behaviours in one block under the same heading of *physical aggression* leaves the student the decision whether the different actions in a whole should be considered when admitting being a victim. Regarding the second procedure, the problem for finding out the total of students victims independently of the way in which they are victimized, is

that percentages of victims for each behaviour cannot be added, due to possible intersections (those receiving more than one kind of bullying behaviour) which then should be subtracted. In order to reach the aggregated incidence of the various maltreatment forms, it is necessary to find out how many students are victimized in more than one form. This would be a different way to approach the severity of incidence.

The two national Spanish surveys sponsored by the Ombudsman and UNICEF approached the problem of estimation of bullying incidence through a questionnaire addressed to investigate thirteen specific peer abuse behaviours. A further look into the data should allow us to estimate the incidence of multiple maltreatment among students. This is the main objective of the present communication. In addition, it has been necessary to test empirically the internal validity of the system that is postulated for classifying the thirteen peer abuse behaviours considered.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

A representative sample of 3000 students (half boys, half girls), from 300 secondary schools was selected in the study. The sample was proportionally stratified taking into account the number of state and private schools, size of school location, and the specific Spanish autonomous community. Taking a confidence level of 95.5%, the error of estimation was  $\pm 2.2\%$ . Ten students from each school were randomly selected, two from each of the four years of compulsory secondary school (ESO), and two more students, rotating their specific school year in each school. So the 3000 students were uniformly distributed over the four academic levels. Moreover 92.5% were autochthon; 7.1% were immigrants (mostly first generation).

### *Materials*

The ad-hoc questionnaire used for the first Ombudsman's Report was used for the present study. Students in Catalonia, Galicia and Basque Country could choose their own language version of the questionnaire.

As described elsewhere (Defensor del Pueblo-UNICEF, 2007; del Barrio, Martín, Montero, Gutiérrez, Barrios y de Dios, in press), questions dealing with the different aspects were always posed in relation to every specific behaviour-type of peer abuse. Questions were formulated from three different points of view corresponding to the possible status of the interviewee as a victim, a bully or a witness. In the case of the pupil being a *victim*, s/he was asked about each type of behaviour for: (a) severity of bullying behaviours experienced; (b) aggressor's profile (gender, year form); (c) setting; (d) people with whom s/he communicates; (e) people intervening; and (f) how s/he is treated by teachers. In the case of the student as a *bully*, he/she was asked again about each type of bullying for: (a) the severity of aggressions carried out; (b) reactions by observers; and (c) whether s/he joined the group in the bullying.

Other questions were posed to the student as an *observer*. Participants' peer

relationships and use of new technologies (Internet, cellular phone, etc) for peer victimization were also asked for.

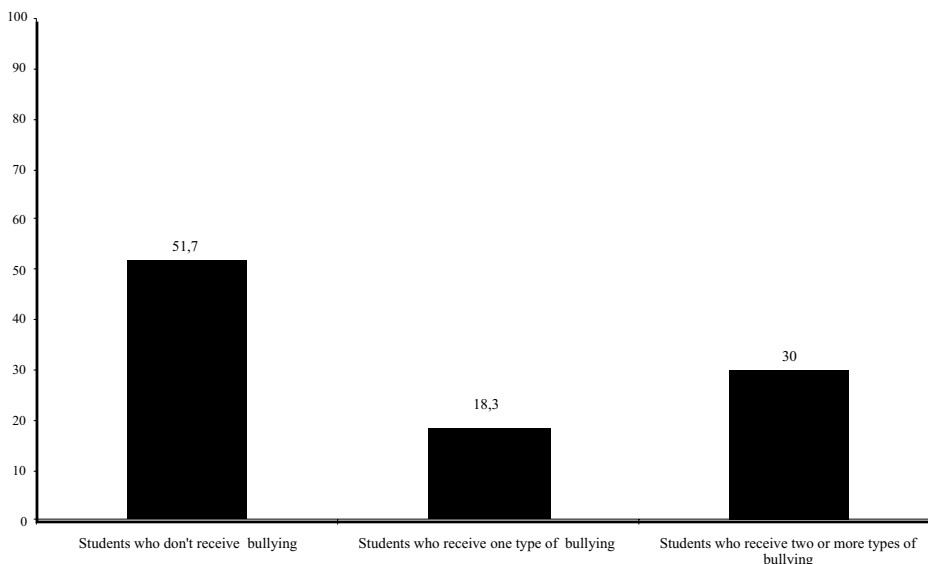
### *Design and procedure*

This is a descriptive study through survey research, with probability sampling (Montero & León, 2007). Data collection took place during the winter quarter by interviewers from a surveys agency properly trained by the authors. In each school, questionnaires were administered by interviewers to the 10 selected student-participants in a separate room and in the absence of any teacher (Defensor del Pueblo-UNICEF, 2007).

## RESULTS

In this section data regarding the estimation of incidence of multiple maltreatment, i.e. victimization through two or more different behaviours, is presented first. This incidence is then analysed in terms of the usual broad categories of peer abuse instead of bullying behaviours. Finally, the categorization system for peer abuse is empirically tested by conducting a factor analysis from the thirteen bullying behaviours considered in the questionnaire.

Figure 1 shows the results of incidence of victims as three different percentages of students: (a) those who say never having been victims of abuse from their schoolmates (51.7%, histogram on the left); (b) those who are victims of only one of the thirteen specific behaviours considered as abuse that were included in the questionnaire (18.3%,



*Figure 1.* Percentage of victims of "one" or "two or more" of the thirteen bullying behaviours considered (N= 3000).

histogram on the centre); and (c) those who are victims of two or more of those behaviours from their peers (30%, histogram on the right).

In a second step, these results are looked at taking into account six grouping categories for describing the various forms of peer maltreatment: social exclusion, verbal aggression, indirect physical aggression, direct physical aggression, threats, and sexual harassment. Figure 2 shows, within each of the six categories, the distribution of students as a function of three different cases: never been abused, having been victims of only one of the behaviours included in the category and having been victims of two or more of these behaviours.

In the case of direct physical aggression and sexual harassment, both categories including just only behaviour, the histograms cannot show the percentage of students that were victims of two or more behaviours within each category. This could be considered as intra-categories multiple bullying. Note that a student who says s/he does not experience this kind of multiple victimization could report being the target of various bullying behaviours of a different nature, i.e. pertaining to different categories, e.g. *having her/his belongings stolen* (indirect physical aggression) and *being threatened* (threats/blackmail). After this clarification, the most relevant data from the Figure 2 is the distribution of students who are victims of any type of verbal aggression (45.6%). Among them, more than a half (24.9%) is a victim of two or more forms of verbal aggression (*I am insulted, I am called offending/humiliating nicknames, They spread rumours about me*).

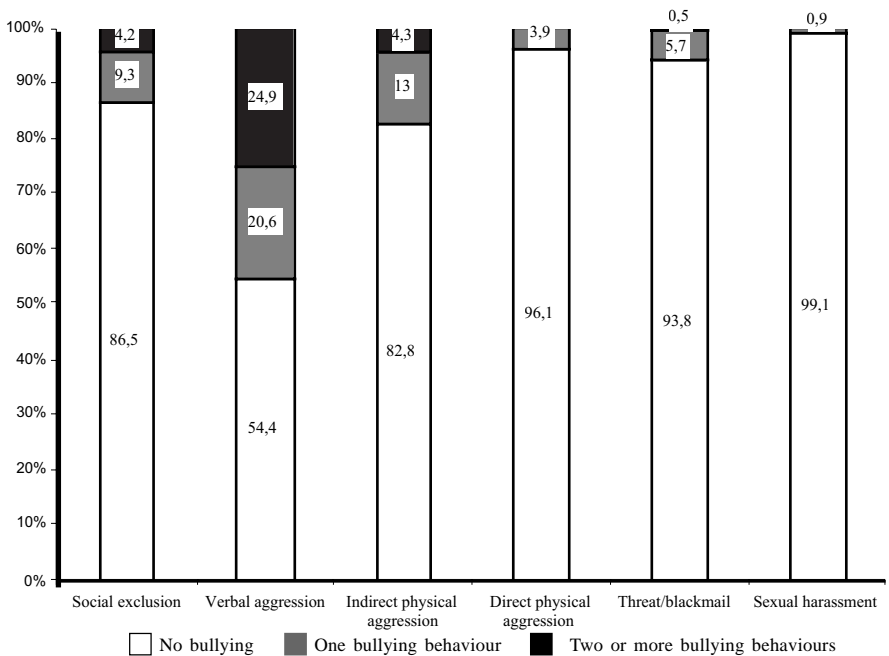


Figure 2. Percentage of victims of "one" or "two or more" bullying behaviours within each category.

The distribution of percentages within other categories with relatively high level of incidence -social exclusion and indirect physical aggression- show a less severe level of multiple victims within the same category. A third part of those reporting to be victims of social exclusion (13.5%) admits to suffer both types of behaviours (4.2%, *being ignored, not let participate*). Regarding to indirect physical aggressions, a quarter of the victims of this type of abuse (17.2%), admits suffering two or more of the three behaviours included in the category (4.3%). Finally, the category of threats shows a very low level of multi-maltreatment. Less than 10% of the victims of this type of abuse (6.2%) admit experiencing two or more of the three behaviours included in the category (0.5%). After these data showing the percentages of students suffering more than one bullying behaviours *within the same category* of peer abuse, a further analysis allows firstly to specify the percentages of victims of different maltreatment *categories*, i.e. what could be considered as multiple maltreatment across categories. And secondly, to establish the percentages of students bullied through behaviours included in two or more of the six maltreatment categories that were considered in this research.

Table 1 shows the incidence of each of the six maltreatment types (or categories) including the percentages of co-occurrence with the other five. There are two cases of very high incidence of multiple maltreatments when it is considered as suffering peer abuse behaviours from two or more types of the six analysed in the study. Among those who are victims of social exclusion, 10.6% report also being the target of verbal aggression. In addition, 12.8% of students experiencing verbal aggression report being victims of indirect physical aggression. With a more moderate level of incidence appear 5.4% of student suffering at the same time verbal aggression and threats/blackmail, and 4.4% of those who are victims of verbal aggression and social exclusion at the same time. The case of co-occurrence of verbal aggression and threats can be explained in part due to the system for grouping the bullying behaviours in categories of peer abuse.

Table 1. Percentages of bullying categories.

	Total	Social exclusion	Verbal aggression	Indirect physical aggression	Direct physical aggression	Threat blackmail	Sexual harassment
Social exclusion	13.5	1.0	10.6	4.4	1.9	2.6	0.2
Verbal aggression	45.6		20.1	12.7	3.4	5.4	0.5
Indirect physical aggression	17.2			3.5	1.5	2.1	0.2
Direct physical aggression	3.9				0.1	1.5	0.2
Threat blackmail	6.2					0.1	0.1
Sexual harassment	0.9						0.1

In Table 2, the co-occurrence of behaviours independently of the maltreatment category is specified including in the first column the percentages of victims of each behaviour for reference. As far as interaction of verbal aggression and indirect physical aggression is concerned, the highest percentages appear between *hiding my belongings* and *insulting me* (8.8%), and between *hiding my belongings* and *spreading rumours about me* (8.6%). Then it is this particular behaviour against one's belongings (*hiding my belongings*) more than the two other indirect physical aggressions (*stealing*, *breaking one's belongings*) what contributes to the strong association between verbal aggression and the indirect physical category for bullying. For the co-occurrence of verbal aggression and social exclusion, the highest percentage is between those that were insulted or rumours were spread about them and were ignored as well (7.3% and 7.9% respectively).

The rest of co-occurrences appear in lower percentages, although significant. In general, students who are victims are likely to experience more than only one kind of maltreatment behaviour. The only exception is *sexual harassment*, unrelated with other types of victimization except *hitting*. Nevertheless this does not mean that victims of sexual harassment are not victimized in other ways as well.

Finally, a factor analysis was performed to check how the diverse behaviours of maltreatment are grouped into categories. In Figure 3 the result of grouping behaviours by factors or categories, and the saturation level for factors are shown. The grouping

Table 2. Percentages of co-occurrence of the bullying behaviours.

	Total	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
Ignore me (1)	10.5	0.4	4.2	7.3	6.5	7.9	4.2	1.3	2.1	1.8	2.5	0.6	0.3	0.1
Don't let me participate (2)	8.6		0.6	5.7	5.0	5.7	3.2	1.1	1.8	1.3	2.2	0.5	0.1	0.2
Insult me (3)	27.1			2.1	16.5	17.0	8.8	2.4	3.6	3.5	4.9	0.5	0.3	0.3
Call me humiliating names (4)	26.7				3.4	14.2	7.5	2.3	3.3	3	4.4	0.5	0.4	0.3
Spread negative rumours about me (5)	31.6					5.7	8.6	2.1	4.3	2.8	4.5	0.5	0.4	0.6
Hide my belongings (6)	16.0						2.4	2.9	3.8	1.6	2.3	0.6	0.3	0.3
Damage my belongings (7)	3.5							0.1	2	0.8	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.2
Steal my belongings (8)	6.3								0.6	1.2	1.6	0.3	0.2	0.1
Hit me (9)	3.9									0.1	1.7	0.3	0.3	0.2
Threaten just to scare me (10)	6.4										0.1	0.5	0.3	0.1
Force me to do things I don't want by way of threats (11)	0.6											0	0.1	0
Threaten me with weapons (12)	0.5												0	0.1
Harass me sexually (13)	0.9													0.1



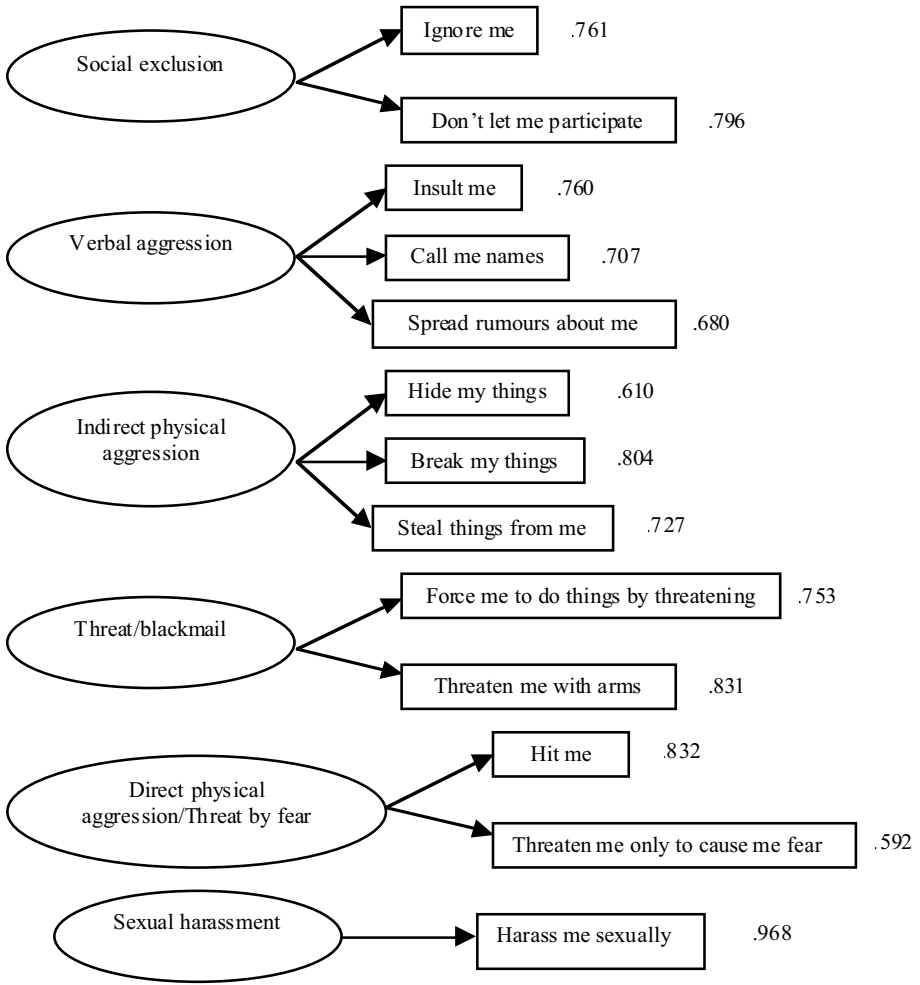


Figure 3. Factor analysis.

of victimization behaviours in six factors is coincident almost absolutely with the theoretical grouping of behaviours posed in the IDP-U (2007). This result points to the close relationship between the various behaviours embedded in each category. It is worth to underline the relationship between direct physical aggression and one of the threats behaviours (*I am threaten only to get scared*), both saturating in the same factor.

**DISCUSSION**

Multi-maltreatment, conceptualized as being victim of various ways of maltreatment is more frequent than maltreatment in a single way amongst the secondary students

participating in the national-wide study carried out for the Ombudsman's report on school violence (Defensor del Pueblo-UNICEF, 2007). Those being multi-maltreated do not usually receive aggressions pertaining to a single category (social exclusion, verbal aggression, direct, indirect physical aggression, i.e. addressed to one's belongings, threats and sexual harassment). Nevertheless, the various behaviours included in the category of verbal aggression are likely to appear together as forms of victimization experienced by the students. In fact, almost 25% of them receive two or more types of verbal aggressions. The different categories show a strong association, meaning that multi-victims receive different aggressions, with a variety of combinations. Nevertheless, the proportion of students who are target of verbal aggression and target also of social exclusion or indirect physical aggression goes surpass the percentages of students being simultaneously the target of different bullying categories. When looking at the particular behaviours within categories that are more present jointly with other it seems very frequent to be verbally attacked and having belongings hidden.

The results of factor analysis confirm in general the structure of categories. The different behaviours usually considered as behaviours embedded within every single category appear very close related. Only two behaviours corresponding to two different categories appear associated one to the other: hit and threatening for scaring. This could mean that threats could refer to eventual physical aggressions, and once threats are performed (no need to be through arms, no need to force the other to do something under the threats), then they are acted. Then with the exception of verbal aggression, these data point to the fact that it is not justified to ask jointly within a single question for the different behaviours pertaining to the same category. Although the very different results obtained in the national study for different behaviours within the same category (for example indirect physical aggressions, much more victims of hiding than stealing or breaking one's belongings) lead to confirm the need to ask for every single behaviour in an independent way, the data resulting from the present study confirm the appropriateness of this procedure. It seems convenient to use this result for future research.

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