PSICOLOGIA E FORMAÇÃO NO DISCURSO DE ESTUDANTES E PROFESSORES DA UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO PARANÁ: UM ESTUDO

se aos padrões científicos e sociais, apontando para a dificuldade dos estudantes se verem como sujeitos ativos e transformadores da realidade.

Para concluir, apontamos que a multiplicidade e diversidade de olhares sobre o objeto da psicologia reafirmam sua complexidade e adverte para a necessidade do professor/pesquisador sair de sua postura autoritária, de quem tem a verdade, e abrir seu referencial teórico para o diálogo com os outros referenciais e principalmente voltar-se para seu objeto de estudo. É no objeto de estudo que se encontra a potencialidade da descoberta do novo.

REFERÊNCIAS


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HOW IS SOCIAL COMPETENCE RELATED TO AGGRESSION AND/OR VICTIMIZATION IN SCHOOL?

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ABSTRACT:

This study presents empirical evidence that can contribute to highlight the relations between the experience of aggression and victimization of adolescents in school settings and their social competence. Assuming that social competence is a multidimensional concept, the aim of this study is to clarify what are the dimensions of social competence that are in deficit in adolescents that are aggressors, victims or both in school. A cross sectional study was conducted with 572 adolescents attending 3 grades at 4 schools. Six types of instruments were administered in the class: a self-report about school violence and social exclusion and several instruments to access different dimensions of social competence. Results show that aggressors, victims, victims/aggressors and non-involved can be differentiated by their sociometric status; by some psychosocial attributes perceived by peers; by their attitudes favourable to violence; and by the type of interpersonal strategy chose to solve real and hypothetical interpersonal conflicts, but could not be differentiated by the level of moral reasoning. We suggest that both victims and aggressors have some sort of deficit in social competence but not necessarily in the same dimensions, when compared with no-involved adolescents.

Key words: aggression; victimization; social competence, sociometric status, moral reasoning

The type of relation between social competence and aggression, as well as the social function of aggression, has been a source of debate and polemics in the last years (Pellegrini, 2008). The assumption that aggressors have lack of social competence or some deficits in it, as suggested by some authors (Crick & Dodge, 1994; 1999) is contested by several other authors (Sutton, Smith &
Swettenham, 1999, 1999a, 2001), who defend that social competence of aggressors is not different from that of non-involved in such problems, and in the case of relational aggression can even be more sophisticated (Merrell; Buchanan & Tran, 2006).

This study discusses and presents some empirical evidence that can contribute to highlight the relations between the experience of aggression, victimization or both of adolescents in school settings and their social competence.

In the last decades, research has been drawing attention to the theme of bullying in school or of the more general problem of aggression and victimization in school settings. We can define aggression as the behaviour that intentionally is aimed at harming or injuring another person or persons or behaviour that inflicts physical or mental harm, property loss or damage on others and which may or may not constitute the breaking of criminal laws (see Roebuck, 2014, p.781, Little, & Hoy, 1997, p.373). We can define victimization as the target of aggressive behaviour.

Bullying is usually defined as a subtype of aggressive behaviour that is repeated in time and where some one abuses his power over an indefensible victim (see Olweus, 1997; Smith, Morita, Jungen-Tas, Olweus, Caltalano & Sleen 1999).

In this study, our focus will be on aggression and victimization in school settings, because these concepts are broader than the bullying concept and are closer to the behaviours checked by our instruments. We will use the expression victimization to refer the experience of being aggressed against and aggression as the expression that reflects the experience of inflicting aggression on others.

Several authors define and assess social competence in different ways and frequently the majority of them considered it a multidimensional concept (e.g., Rose-Krasnor, 1997). In one sense, these different dimensions can be associated with self-perception and perceptions of significant others in ecological environment, like peers; parents and teachers, for example (Junttila & Vauras, 2008). In another sense, it can also mean that being socially competent includes several skills, namely: to solve personal problems and interpersonal conflicts in a positive way with positive social outcomes for all (Rose-Krasnor, 1987); to make and maintain friends; to enter into a group and be part of it; to be prosocial (Crick & Dodge, 1994); to understand others; to persuade and be able to influence or manipulate others (Merrell, Buchanan & Tran, 2006; Smith, Swettenham, 1999, 1999a, 2001); to get social status in a group, like popularity; to obtain leadership and social dominance in a group (Pellegrini, 2008; Rodkin & Berger, 2008).

The research with children and early adolescents reveal that the conditions of being a victim or being an aggressor seems to be associated with different patterns of sociometric status, as well as with other psychosocial attributes perceived by peers (see Crick & Dodge, 1994; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Xie, Swift, Cairns & Caims, 2002).

Several empirical studies have found, repeatedly, that aggressors and victims are more rejected by peers than children or adolescents non-involved in those problems (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994; Hodges, Malone & Perry, 1997; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003).

Crick & Dodge (1994) explain the aggressive behaviour as a form of deviation in social adjustment that seems to be associated with some sociometric status; with some patterns of social behaviour and with other problems in the way children and adolescents process social information.

Some empirical studies (e.g., Hodges & Perry, 1999; Pellegrini, Bartini & Brooks, 1999) also found that victims, besides being rejected by peers, have few or no friends at all. Hodges et al. (1997, p.1037) suggest that: “Having friends may protect children in several ways. First, aggressive children may fear retaliation or ostracism from victim’s friends. Second, children who interact with friends will be alone less often and thus will be less available or less salient targets. Third, children with friends may profit from friends’ advice on how to handle conflicts and threats of victimization”.

With regard to aggressors, the empirical evidence (e.g., Cairns, Cairns, Neckerjanz, Gest & Garlepy, 1988; Xie et al., 2002) suggest that, in spite of being rejected by the large group of peers, they generally have a more restricted group of friends, that support or approve of their aggressive activities. In fact, many studies suggest that aggression seems to be mainly a group phenomenon, where children and adolescents perform different roles and that aggressors tend to affiliate with similar peers (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 2000; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kraukliane, 1998; Salmivalli, Lapiainen & Lagerspetz, 1998; Xie et al., 2002; Salmivalli & Helteenvuori, 2007).

As for victims, research suggests that they are rejected by peers; are insecure; have higher levels of anxiety and other psychosomatic symptoms; have low self-esteem and, in general, have a negative social self-perception (Rigby, 1999). Recent longitudinal studies (Salmivalli & Ukkas, 2003) suggest that those aspects are not just a consequence of victimization, but also emphasise that a negative self-perception predicts victimization, and the negative perceptions by peers seem to be a consequence of victimization. So, revision of scientific literature seems to lead to the conclusion that victims have lack of social competence and, as a consequence, can probably benefit from programmes and interventions that foster it (see Coie & Dodge, 2000) but, as regards aggressors, the empirical facts are not conclusive and authors do not seem to agree about the dimensions of social competence that are lacking or are rather associated with that behaviour instead.

In this study we try to clarify that issue assessing and comparing some dimensions commonly associated with social competence. After identifying aggressors, victims, victims/aggressors and non-involved through a self-report, we compare these four groups in different aspects of social competence, namely: sociometric status; several psychosocial negative and positive attributes perceived by peers; moral reasoning assessed with Kohlberg’s methodology; an attitude scale favourable to violence and a qualitative instrument built to assess the type of strategy enacted to solve an interpersonal conflict in hypothetical and real situations. We hypothesised that there will be differences in the four groups in all these dimensions.

We want to clarify what are the specific dimensions of social competence that differentiate victims, Victims/aggressors and aggressors from non-involved and specially between them. And with regard to aggressors, are they socially competent (Sutton, Smith & Swettenham, 1999, 2001) or do they have deficits in social competence (Crick & Dodge, 1994,1999)?

METHOD

Participants

572 adolescents: 286 males and 286 females, which attend 7th, 9th and 11th forms at Portuguese schools. Mean age: 14 years and 7 months. SD: 1.8 years. Ages oscillate between 12 and 18 years old.

Measures

A self-report about social exclusion and school violence (OEVE) adapted from Diaz-Aguado, Arias & Seara (2004) was used in this study. This self-report contains three scales with 15 items each one, which, respectively, allowed assessing the conditions of being victim, aggressor or observer of school violence. Each one of these scales includes 4 items that allowed assessing social exclusion or relational aggression (e.g.: to ignore or being ignored by somebody; to exclude or being excluded from groups); items that assess verbal aggression (e.g.: to insult or being insulted); and 9 items assessing physical aggression or victimization (e.g.: to hit or being victim of beating; to threaten or being threatened). Subjects should signal one of four alternatives (1–never; 2 – sometimes, 3 – frequently or 4 – all the time) for each item. The 3 subscales reveal good reliability because Cronbach alpha were: 0.84 for the victim subscale; 0.80 for the aggressor subscale and 0.89 for the observer subscale (Martins, 2009).

A peer nomination questionnaire adapted from Diaz-Aguado et al. (1996) allowed to assess the sociometric status of each subject, as well as several psychosocial characteristics, as they were perceived by the peers in his class. This measure permitted to obtain scores relative to preferences in schoolwork; preferences in leisure; rejections in schoolwork; rejections in leisure; corresponding to 4 items where each adolescent could nominate 5 colleagues from the same class. This measure allowed also assess positive attributes and negative attributes. There were 9 positive attributes listed: to have...
lots of friends and all the ones listed on table 3. There were 14 negatives attributes listed: to have few friends and all the ones listed on table 4. So there were 23 attributes and for all of them the question was: Who is the boy or girl in your class that fits in the following description ... They could nominate one or more classmates for each attribute or consider that there was nobody with a specific attribute.

- The questionnaire of social competence was a qualitative measure built to know how interpersonal conflicts were solved in real and hypothetical situations. An hypothetical story about bullying at school was written for this research. This story included an observer, a victim of money extortion, and a group of aggressors. We presented several questions to know how the adolescent would solve the hypothetical conflict (to help or not the victim and how) and about the way he/she has solved a real situation of interpersonal conflict lived recently. The answers were coded in terms of type of the strategies enacted: aggressive or not aggressive, to solve the hypothetical and real conflict situations. The inter-judges agreement for coding the answers was 95% for hypothetical situations and 91% for real situations (Martins, 2009).

- An attitude scale favourable to violence adapted from Diaz-Aguado et al. (2004) with 40 items assessing stereotyped sexist beliefs; domestic violence and justification of peer aggression. Cronbach alpha was 0.88 revealing good reliability.

- The Heinz' dilemma life/law from Colly and Kohlberg manual (1997) was administered collectively as a qualitative questionnaire. The inter-judges agreement for coding the answers was 85% for total agreement and 96% for differences of a half stage (Martins, 2009).

**Procedure**

We conducted a cross-sectional study with the 3 levels mentioned. The subjects answered the questionnaires in their habitual class in the school. Classes were chosen arbitrarily in the four schools of the town and almost half of the adolescents from each school answered the questionnaires, spending around 2 hours filling in. A code was used to substitute the names and confidentiality about individual results was granted.

The scores obtained in the peer nomination questionnaire were transformed into percentages to allow comparisons between individuals from different classes.

The results of the self-report (QEV) were split in four groups based on the sum of responses given to the victim and aggressor subscales (see table 1). This procedure allowed to identify four types of subjects that fit in one of four groups: victim; aggressor; victim/aggressor and non-involved. The groups referred to as being a victim, an aggressor or a victim/aggressor included not only the subjects that were either very often or just occasionally in one of those conditions (see Table 1 and graph 1).

**Table 1: Criteria for splitting the sample in 4 groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Sum of responses in the aggressor subscale</th>
<th>Sum of responses in the victim subscale</th>
<th>Amplitude of each subscale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>&lt; or = 18</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
<td>15-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressor</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
<td>&lt; or = 18</td>
<td>15-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim/aggressor</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
<td>15-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-involved</td>
<td>&lt; or = 18</td>
<td>&lt; or = 18</td>
<td>15-60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESULTS**

After splitting the sample in 4 groups, we found that 10.7% subjects of the sample experienced the condition of being a victim/aggressor; 12.9% lived the condition of being an aggressor; 19.8% lived the conditions of being a victim; the majority (51.9%) were non-involved and the 5.4% left didn’t answer properly the questionnaire and couldn’t be included in any group (see graph 1).

**Graph 1: Percentages of adolescents found in the 4 groups**

After this procedure the four groups were compared in respect to the various dimensions described above. To test the statistical significance between the 4 groups in those dimensions we used the One-Way ANOVA and Levene test to test the variances homogeneity. Bold on tables indicates what are the specific differences that are statistically significant.

Table 2 presents the means of the 4 groups in each sociometric status, together with the attributes relative to have lots or few friends.

**Table 2: Sociometric status and attributes related with friendship**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociometric status and friendship</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Aggressor</th>
<th>Victim/Aggressor</th>
<th>Non-involved</th>
<th>Comparability between means and sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferences for work</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>A=V;A=NV;V=NV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences for leisure</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>V=NV;A=NV;A=V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejections for work</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>V=A;V=NV;A=V;V=NV;A=V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejections for leisure</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>V=NV;A=NV;A=V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have lots of friends</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>A=NV;V=NV;A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have few friends</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>V=NV;A=NV;A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see in Table 2 victims were more rejected by peers for schoolwork and for leisure than non-involved adolescents; they were less preferred for schoolwork and were perceived as having fewer friends compared to non-involved adolescents, in a way that is statistically significant. Aggressors were more rejected than non-involved for schoolwork and for leisure but, as was predicted, they were not perceived as having fewer friends than non-involved adolescents; they were perceived as having as many friends as the non-involved and they were not less preferred than non-involved, in a statistically significant way. Victims/aggressors were also more rejected than non-involved.

Table 3 presents the means of the 4 groups in each one of the positive attributes.
Table 3: Positive attributes in the 4 groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive attributes</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Aggressor</th>
<th>Victim/Aggressor</th>
<th>Non-involved</th>
<th>Comparability between means and sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get on well with teachers</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be agreeable with companions</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand others</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be able to solve conflicts</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be able to help others</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be able to communicate</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be happy with other's successes</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be mature</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>NS=V+A/V+A 0.176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive attributes | 0.108  | 0.157     | 0.114            | 0.148        | NS=V+A/V+A 0.273                    |

Table 3 indicates that, in a general way, victims are perceived with less positive attributes than non-involved and even than aggressors; especially they are perceived, in a significant statistically way, as less: agreeable with companions; able to understand others; able to help others; able to communicate and mature.

Data on table 3 indicate that, in a general way, aggressors are perceived with almost the same positive attributes as non-involved adolescents. They were just perceived as being less: able to understand others. They are perceived as able as non-involved to solve conflicts and to help others.

Table 4 presents the means of the 4 groups in each one of the negative attributes.

Data on table 4 indicate that, in a general way, victims are perceived with more negative attributes than non-involved and aggressors too and they are near to victim/aggressors in some of the attributes; especially they are perceived, in a statistically significant way, as having more difficulties in relations with teachers; being more disagreeable with companions; having more problems to understand others; being less able to understand the weakness of others; having more envy; more insecure even though pretending the opposite; feeling more failure; superiority; boring; immaturity and wanting more attracting attentions, compared to non-involved adolescents. Data on table 4 also indicate that, in a general way, aggressors are perceived with more negative attributes than non-involved adolescents; especially they are perceived, in a significant statistically way, as having more difficulties in relations with teachers; more difficulties in understanding others; being more aggressive; having more difficulties in understanding the weakness of others; feeling more superiority; wanting more attracting attentions; and being more boring, than non-involved adolescents. They were perceived, in general, with less and different negative attributes when compared to victims.

Table 4: Negative attributes and attitudes in the 4 groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative attributes</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Aggressor</th>
<th>Victim/Aggressor</th>
<th>Non-involved</th>
<th>Comparability between means and sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t get on well with teachers</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be disagreeable with companions</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t understand others</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be aggressive</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>A=V+A/V+A 0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t understand the other’s weakness</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have difficulties in communicating</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have envy</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hide insecurity, pretending the opposite</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel a failure</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel superior</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>A=V+A/V+A 0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To want always to attract attention</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be boring</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be immature</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attributes</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>V=V+A/V+A 0.273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Victims and victim/aggressors were the groups that were perceived with more negative attributes and they didn't differ much between them. With regard to attitudes favourable to violence, victim/aggressors and aggressors were all together the groups more favourable to violence when compared to non-involved and victims (but didn’t differ between them). Victims/aggressors share some negative characteristics with victims and others with aggressors.

Table 5 presents the means of the 4 groups concerning the sociocognitive variables. Data on table 5 reveals that non-involved seemed to have a higher level of moral reasoning but the differences between the four groups were not statistically significant. Victims/aggressors together with aggressors choose more violent strategies to solve hypothetical and real conflicts, when compared with non-involved and victims in a statistically significant way. Victims and victim/aggressors assumed that they lived a similar situation to the victim's in the hypothetical story and victims/aggressors and aggressors assumed they lived a similar situation to the aggressor's in the hypothetical story, an aspect that contributes to reveal the concurrent validity of this data.
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Table 5: Socio-cognitive and Behavioural Variables in the 4 Groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-cognitive and Behavioural Variables</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Aggressor</th>
<th>Victim/Aggressor</th>
<th>Non-involved</th>
<th>Comparability between means statistical sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of moral reasoning (Kohlberg)</td>
<td>2.3~3.2</td>
<td>2.3~3.2</td>
<td>2.3~3.2</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>N.S. = Y = Y = A (0.134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent strategies in the resolution of a hypothetical conflict</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>Y = A &lt; A = N &lt; E (0.067)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent strategies in the resolution of real conflicts</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>Y = A &lt; A = N &lt; E (0.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live a situation similar to that of the victim in a hypothetical story</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Y = A = A &lt; N &lt; E (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live a situation similar to that of the aggressor in a hypothetical story</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>Y = A = A &lt; N &lt; E (0.000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Globally, we can state that victims, victim-aggressors, and aggressors were more rejected by peers than the non-involved adolescents, but we can also state that victims and victim-aggressors were even more rejected than aggressors and were perceived with more negative attributes and fewer friends than aggressors, in a statistically significant way.

The psychosocial characteristics associated to victims, in this study, were similar to those obtained by other studies which found that victims were more rejected by peers and also had fewer friends than non-involved adolescents (e.g., Hodges & Perry, 1999). In our study we also found that peers perceived victims as having a lot of negative psychological characteristics and that they are perceived with many more negative psychosocial characteristics than aggressors.

With respect to aggressors, our data were also congruent with other empirical studies, in which aggressors, in spite of rejected by the large group of peers, were not without friends (e.g., Cairns et al., 1988; Xie et al, 2002). Aggressors seem to have a restricted group of friends that support, or at least approve of their aggressive activities. This configuration of data suggests that aggression is a group phenomenon (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 2000; Salmivalli et al, 1996; 1998).

The results of our study also indicate that victims are perceived with some psychosocial negative characteristics that are different from those perceived in aggressors and with some other psychosocial characteristics that are similar to those perceived in the aggressors. Victims and aggressors were viewed by their peers, as persons who aren’t able to understand others and that don’t relate well with teachers. Victims were also perceived with a lot of other negative attributes, namely they were perceived as persons with difficulties in communication; wanting to attract more attention; more disagreeable with companions; more immature; that feel envy and failure; and that have few or no friends. Aggressors, but not victims, were perceived with as many friends as non-involved adolescents and as persons that feel superior; don’t understand the weakness of others; being also aggressive and boring. This pattern of psychosocial attributes is congruent with other empirical evidence that seems to indicate aggressors as persons who feel lack of or less empathy and guilt when compared to non-aggressors (Gibbs, 1991). The association between sociometric status and the different patterns of psychosocial attributes, found in this study, were also congruent to what is predicted by the model of Crick & Dodge (1994) to explain aggressive behaviour as a problem in social adjustment. Curious in our study is the fact that these patterns also appear when we access and compare groups occasionally involved in aggression and victimization.

Considering the cross-sectional nature of the study we can’t establish the causal sense of these data. Do those negative attributes lead to victimization? Or does victimization promote the perception of negative attributes in victims instead? Some studies, with children and early adolescents, suggest that some characteristics seem to predispose to victimization and also that being intimidated can aggravate those characteristics, in a vicious circle that can explain the stability of the condition of being a victim. This pattern makes it difficult to get out of that condition without any help (see Hodges & Perry, 1999; Salmivalli & Isaks, 2005).

To sum up, victims are mainly perceived with negative psychosocial characteristics but that is not exactly the case for aggressors. In fact, they are perceived with some positive characteristics, like superiority and having as many friends as other adolescents. These profiles are also congruent with data obtained by other studies, using different instruments (Eslea, Menesini, Morita, O’Meara, Merchan, Pereira & Smith, 2003). Victim/aggressors share aspects of both groups and could be in higher risk for that reason.

Why are victims perceived in such a negative way? We think that these data can be explained by the Lerner theory about the belief in a just world. Lerner (cited by Vala & Correa, 2003) states: “People want to and have to believe they live in a just world so that they can go about their daily lives with a sense of trust, hope and confidence in their future”. So the belief in a just world is «the belief that people get what they deserve or, conversely, deserve what they get» (see Lerner & Simons, 1995, p. 204). This belief seems to be associated to psychological well being and helps us to live, because it gives some order to our social world, but it can also lead us to attribute guilt to innocent victims and, that way, also to make difficult the necessary help to the victims (see Vala & Correa, 2003). So devaluing the victims or perceiving them with negative attributes is a form of maintaining coherence in our social world, assuming that they are in that position because they deserve it in some way in a supposedly fair world.

Why are the aggressors perceived in a global positive way by a large number of adolescents, who aren’t aggressive? Aggressive behaviour seems to be associated with the capacity for obtaining benefits or with the domination of others, which seems to cause some kind of admiration! Curious in our study are the results obtained in regard to aggressors: they are perceived by peers as able as non-involved to solve conflicts; to help others; to communicate; and to be happy with the other’s success but when they are asked to choose how to help a victim of bullying in a hypothetical story or describe how they would solve an interpersonal conflict, they tend to choose aggressive strategies (for example, an adolescent, when asked how he would help a victim of bullying, proposed to join a group of friends and physically attack the bullies in the story). So aggressors are able to solve conflicts and help friends; however, the question is, how do they do it? Our results permit to conciliate apparent divergences found by several authors, namely those that suggest that aggressors are socially competent because they know how to manipulate and impose themselves to others (Andreou, 2000; Smorti & Ciucci, 2000; Pellegrini, 2008) and those that suggest they have social competence deficits due to the type of strategies used in tense social situations (Crick & Dodge, 1994, 1999; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The ecological social environment seems to have an important role in the enactment and continuity of aggressive behaviour, as other studies about aggression seem to reveal (Salmivalli et al, 1998; Zimbardo, 2007).

So these and other data about aggression and victimization suggest the need for prevention programs in schools. The target of these programmes should be the groups or the total community, since all the studies seem to indicate that aggression is a group phenomenon! Those programmes should also cope with the representations of all adolescents about aggression and victimization and promote not just social competence but also specific non-aggressive strategies to solve interpersonal conflicts and change the ecological social environment of schools and communities (see Diaz-Aguado et al., 1996; 2004; Fox & Boulton, 2003).
HOW IS SOCIAL COMPETENCE RELATED TO AGGRESSION AND/OR VICTIMIZATION IN SCHOOL?

REFERENCES


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