COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDICATORS OF MALADJUSTED PSYCHOSOCIAL BEHAVIOR AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH HIGHER AND LOWER PROPENSITY TO BULLYING BEHAVIOR

ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DE INDICADORES DEL COMPORTAMIENTO PSICOSOCIAL DESAJUSTADO ENTRE ESTUDIANTES DE SECUNDARIA CON MAYOR Y MENOR PROPENSIÓN A LA CONDUCTA DE BULLYING

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Bullying is harmful behavior in school contexts, affecting students' lives. **Objective:** To identify and compare indicators of maladjusted behavior in students with different propensities to bullying. **Methods:** This descriptive and quantitative study used surveys and a comparative followed by correlational design to assess maladjusted behaviors (stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, propensity to violence) in secondary students from Lima and Callao. The non-probabilistic sample included 1345 first and second-year students, divided into two groups based on their bullying propensity (high -Group E- and low -Group C-). Scales from the INDACPS inventories and the Bullying Propensity Scale (BPS) were applied, analyzing data with SPSS v.25 and Jamovi. Differences between groups were assessed using the Mann-Whitney U test, and variable correlation was determined using Spearman's correlation. **Results:** Group E had higher levels of stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence, with statistical significance (p<0.001) compared to Group C. Statistically significant correlations were found between the propensity to bullying and these indicators, being stronger in the total sample (p<0.001). Additionally, significant gender differences were observed in stress, low self-esteem, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence, but not in incivility and bullying propensity. **Conclusion:** Students with a higher propensity to bullying exhibit higher levels of stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence, underscoring the importance of comprehensive interventions.

Keywords: Bullying; Stress; Self-esteem; Violence. (Source: MESH-NLM)

RESUMEN

Introducción: El bullying, es un comportamiento perjudicial en contextos escolares, afectando la vida de los estudiantes. **Objetivo:** Identificar y comparar indicadores de comportamiento desajustado en estudiantes con diferente propensión al bullying. **Métodos:** Este estudio descriptivo y cuantitativo utilizó encuestas y un diseño comparativo seguido de correlacional para evaluar comportamientos desajustados (estrés, baja autoestima, incivismo, desajuste familiar, propensión a la violencia) en estudiantes secundarios de Lima y Callao. La muestra no probabilística incluyó 1345 estudiantes de primer y segundo año, divididos en dos grupos según su propensión al bullying (alto -Grupo E- y bajo -Grupo C-). Se aplicaron escalas de los inventarios INDACPS y la Escala de Propensión al Bullying (EPB), analizando los datos con SPSS v.25 y Jamovi. Las diferencias entre grupos se evaluaron mediante la prueba U de Mann-Whitney, y la correlación de variables se determinó con la correlación de Spearman. **Resultados:** El Grupo E tuvo niveles más altos de estrés, baja autoestima, incivismo, desajuste familiar y propensión a la violencia, con significancia estadística (p<0,001) en comparación al Grupo C. Se encontraron correlaciones estadísticamente significativas entre la propensión al bullying y estos indicadores, siendo más fuertes en la muestra total (p<0,001). Además, se observaron diferencias significativas por sexo en estrés, baja autoestima, desajuste familiar y propensión a la violencia, pero no en incivismo y propensión al bullying. **Conclusión:** Los estudiantes con mayor propensión al bullying exhiben mayores niveles de estrés, baja autoestima, incivismo, desajuste familiar y propensión a la violencia. Lo que resalta la relevancia de intervenciones integrales.

Palabras clave: Bullying; Estrés, Autoestima; Violencia. (Fuente: DeCS BIREME)

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INTRODUCTION

School bullying, commonly known as bullying, refers to a pattern of harmful behavior exerted by one or more students against their peers who are in a disadvantaged position in terms of strength or power. This behavior can manifest in various forms: verbal, physical, psychosocial abuse, or through cyber means, and is specifically carried out with the purpose of causing harm to the victims [1-3].

The conduct of bullying entails a significant risk factor for the victims; it has been observed that they may experience psychological distress, decreased academic performance, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, poor social skills, and low self-esteem [1,4-6]. In the presence of this phenomenon, the role of the teacher is important within the school environment, positively affecting the life satisfaction of students, especially those facing situations of school bullying [7,8]. Various theories have attempted to explain school bullying. Bandura, from the perspective of social learning, postulates that students adopt aggressive behaviors by having observable models. Dollard suggests that aggressive behaviors can be derived from previous experiences of frustration [9].

It has been identified that aggressors often have a negative self-perception in terms of academic performance and family environment, often marked by violent situations, although they tend to be popular among their peers [10,11]. Despite advancements in understanding bullying, there is a gap in knowledge about the specific differences in maladjusted psychosocial indicators among secondary school students with higher and lower propensity for bullying behavior. It is crucial to explore beyond the victims, focusing also on the perpetrators to develop more effective intervention strategies [12].

The main objective of this study is to identify and compare the manifestation of maladjusted behavioral indicators, such as stress, low self-esteem, family maladjustment, uncivil behavior, and propensity for violence, among bullying perpetrators and students who do not exhibit this behavior.

METHODS

Design and Study Area

This research is a descriptive survey study of a quantitative nature. Initially, a comparative descriptive design is used between two distinct samples, followed by a correlational design to identify the relationship between five indicators of maladjusted behavior (stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence) in each selected study group. The control of sociodemographic variables and statistical design enable the inference of the relationship between certain indicators of maladjusted behavior and bullying behavior [12].

Population and Sample

The initial sample consists of 1,345 first and second-year secondary school students from public and private schools in Lima and Callao, selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. There was an equitable distribution in terms of gender, with 694 male students (51.6%) and 651 female students (48.4%). Two study groups were formed: Group E (n=392), with students with a high level of bullying propensity (above the 75th percentile; that is, 4 points or more on the scale), and Group C (n=373), with students with a low level of bullying propensity (below the 25th percentile; that is, 0 points). For the evaluation of the correlation between bullying propensity scores and indicators of maladjusted behavior (stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence), the entire sample was used.

Variables and Instruments

Five scales from the INDACPS inventories [13] were used, which address the dimensions of Family Maladjustment, Stress, Low Self-Esteem, Incivility, and the Scale of Propensity to Violent Behavior (SPVB) and the Scale of Propensity to Bullying (SPB), specially developed for this study and aimed at secondary school students. Each Scale consisted of 8 questions, where experiences related to a rating scale from 0 to 2 (0= never, 2= very frequently, and 1 = sometimes) were evaluated, giving a maximum score of 16 points per scale. As the score increases, it reflected a higher level on each scale. It should be noted that each dimension or scale showed adequate reliability, evidenced by their alpha coefficients: stress (α=0.81), low self-esteem

(α=0.83), incivility (α=0.74), family maladjustment (α=0.69), and propensity to bullying (α=0.77). The SPVB assesses an individual's predisposition to exhibit attitudes associated with impulsivity, anger, and aggression[13]. In this study, 8 items were also used, rated on a scale from 0 to 2 according to the frequency of characteristics related to the propensity for violent behavior, where a higher score indicated a higher level of this propensity. This test demonstrated adequate reliability (α=0.82). The SPB evaluates students' inclination to participate in acts of bullying. This assessment was similarly carried out through 8 items rated on a scale from 0 to 2, based on the frequency of behaviors associated with bullying. Higher scores indicate a greater propensity for these behaviors. The test demonstrated acceptable reliability, with an alpha coefficient of 0.77[14].

Procedures
The evaluations were conducted collectively and in person, with informed consent and an allotted time of approximately 25 minutes. Sociodemographic data such as the type of educational institution, district, and gender of the participants were included. The data were organized in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS v.25 and Jamovi.

Statistical Analysis
The Mann-Whitney U test was applied to assess differences between groups with different levels of bullying propensity, and the Spearman correlation was used to analyze the relationships between variables and determine the effect size. The Mann-Whitney U test was applied to evaluate differences in scores of stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence; between groups with different levels of bullying propensity (groups E and C). Exploratorily, the scores of stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, propensity to violence, and bullying were compared according to sex, in group E[15]. Subsequently, the Spearman correlation was used to analyze the existing correlations between stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence with the bullying propensity score [16,17]. The effect size was also calculated using Cohen's d or Hedges' Δ, as appropriate; it was considered that if the values of the effect size measure were 0.2 to 0.49, the difference is small; 0.5 to 0.79, moderate; 0.8 to 1.29, large; and ≥ 1.3, very large[18].

Ethical Aspects
Informed consent was obtained from the participants and students were carefully instructed on each question and answer of the study, ensuring ethics in the collection and analysis of the data.

RESULTS
In Table 1, the descriptive statistics of the maladjusted behaviors and the propensity to bullying in the sample of 1,345 individuals can be observed. The mean of the bullying propensity is 2.49, with a median of 2. Stress presents a higher mean, standing at 7.16, and a median of 7. For low self-esteem, both the mean and the median are 7. Incivility shows a mean of 2.84 and a median of 2. Lastly, family maladjustment has a mean of 5.43 with a median of 5, and the propensity to violence registers a mean of 4.49 and a median of 4. All scores had a non-normal distribution according to the Shapiro-Wilk test (p<0.001 for all).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables or indicators of maladjusted behaviors in the total study sample.

Variable (n=1345)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Percentiles		
				25	50	75
Bullying Propensity	2,49	2,76	2	0	2	4
Stress	7,16	3,86	7	4	7	10
Low Self-Esteem	7	4,3	7	4	7	10
Incivility	2,84	2,77	2	1	2	4
Family Maladjustment	5,43	3,59	5	3	5	8
Propensity to Violence	4,49	3,64	4	2	4	6

Table 2 shows significant differences between the comparison group (Group C) and the study group (Group E) in aspects related to bullying and its associated variables. Regarding stress, Group E has a higher mean (8.64) than Group C (5.58), with medians of 9 and 5 respectively, and a p-value of less than 0.001, reflecting a large effect size of 0.832. Similarly, in low self-esteem, Group E shows a mean of 8.27 and a median of 8, compared to the mean of 5.74 and median of 5 for Group C, with a moderate effect size of 0.595.

In terms of incivility, Group E presents considerably higher means and medians (4.97 and 5) compared to Group C (1.25 and 1), with a very large effect size of 1.528. In family maladjustment, the means and medians of Group E (6.9 and 7) exceed those of Group C (4.09 and 3), with a large effect size of 0.814. Finally, in propensity to violence, Group E exhibits higher means and medians (6.82 and 6) compared to Group C (2.7 and 2), with a very large effect size of 1.23.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis Between Comparison and Study Groups Regarding Bullying Behavior in Relation to the Evaluated Variables.

Variables	Comparison Groups	Mean	Median	p-value*	Effect Size†
Stress	Group C	5,58	5	<0,001	0,832
	Group E	8,64	9		
Low Self-Esteem	Group C	5,74	5	<0,001	0,595
	Group E	8,27	8		
Incivility	Group C	1,25	1	<0,001	1,528
	Group E	4,97	5		
Family	Group C	4,09	3	<0,001	0,814
Maladjustment	Group E	6,9	7		
Propensity to	Group C	2,7	2	<0,001	1,230
Violence	Group E	6,82	6		

* Mann-Whitney U test. † Hedges' Δ
Group E (n=392): students with a high level of bullying propensity.
Group C (n=373): students with a low level of bullying propensity.

Table 3 shows the correlations between bullying propensity and the five maladjustment indicators evaluated in Group E and in the total sample. All correlations, both in Group E and in the total group, are statistically significant (p<0.001). It is highlighted that the correlation between bullying and incivility in the study group is 0.42, while in the total sample it is 0.55. Furthermore, the relationship between bullying and propensity to violence shows values of 0.397 for the study group and 0.478 for the total sample. It is observed that the correlations are higher in the total

sample compared to Group E. Regarding the effect size of the correlations in the study group, it is found that the relationship between bullying and stress is of medium magnitude (0.401), the relationship between bullying behavior and low self-esteem is 0.147, the relationship between incivility and bullying behavior is of medium-high magnitude (0.648), the relationship between bullying and propensity to violence is 0.630, and the relationship between bullying and family maladjustment is of a moderate level (0.518).

Table 3. Spearman's Correlation between the Bullying Propensity Score and the Indicators Evaluated in the Study Group and in the Total Sample

	Stress	Low Self-Esteem	Incivility	Family Maladjustment	Propensity to Violence
Total Sample (n=345)					
Spearman's Rho	0,324	0,248	0,555	0,337	0,478
p-value	<0,001	<0,001	<0,001	<0,001	<0,001
Study Group (n=373)					
Spearman's Rho	0,161	0,147	0,420	0,268	0,397
p-value	0,002	0,005	<0,001	<0,001	<0,001
Effect Size*	0,401	0,383	0,648	0,518	0,630

* Effect size calculated with Cohen's R

Table 4 compares by gender and shows statistically significant differences ($p<0.05$) in the scales of stress, low self-esteem, family maladjustment, and propensity to violence. On the stress scale, women have a median of 9 and men 8, both placed in a medium range. Regarding low self-esteem, women have a median of 10, positioning them in a high range, while men register a median of 7. In family maladjustment, women show a higher score with a median of 8, compared to the median of 6 in men, placing women in a high range. As for the propensity to violence, both sexes are in a high range, but women present a higher median of 8, in contrast to the median of 6 in men. No statistically significant differences are observed between men and women in the propensity to bullying and in the incivility scale, with both sexes positioned in a high median range.

Table 4. Comparison Analysis by Gender with Respect to the Evaluated Variables.

Variables	Gender	*Mean	Median	p-value†	Effect Size‡
Bullying Propensity	Male	6,17	5	0,879	0,012
	Female	6,2	5		
Stress	Male	8,12	8	<0,001	0,426
	Female	9,46	9		
Low Self-Esteem	Male	7,3	7	<0,001	0,665
	Female	9,76	10		
Incivility	Male	5,08	5	0,328	0,088
	Female	4,81	4		
Family Maladjustment	Male	5,26	6	<0,001	0,504
	Female	7,88	8		
Violence Propensity	Male	6,21	6	0,001	0,409
	Female	7,76	8		

* 226 men and 147 women. †Mann-Whitney U test. ‡ Hedges' Δ

Figure 1 displays the variables associated with bullying propensity in a radar chart, distinguishing between the Study Group (Group E) and the Comparison Group (Group C). A higher incidence of incivility is highlighted, as evidenced by scores concentrated at the 80th percentile in Group E and the 25th percentile in Group C. Additionally, a propensity for violence is observed, with scores reaching the 70th percentile for Group C and the 35th percentile for Group E. Next, the presence of stress and family maladjustment is evident, both located at the 70th percentile for Group C and at the 30th percentile for stress and family maladjustment in Group E. Finally, low self-esteem is found, situated at the 60th percentile for Group E and the 35th percentile for Group C. These scores are compared to the percentiles of the entire sample, which surpass the mean across all variables for Group E, while presenting lower scores in all variables for Group C.
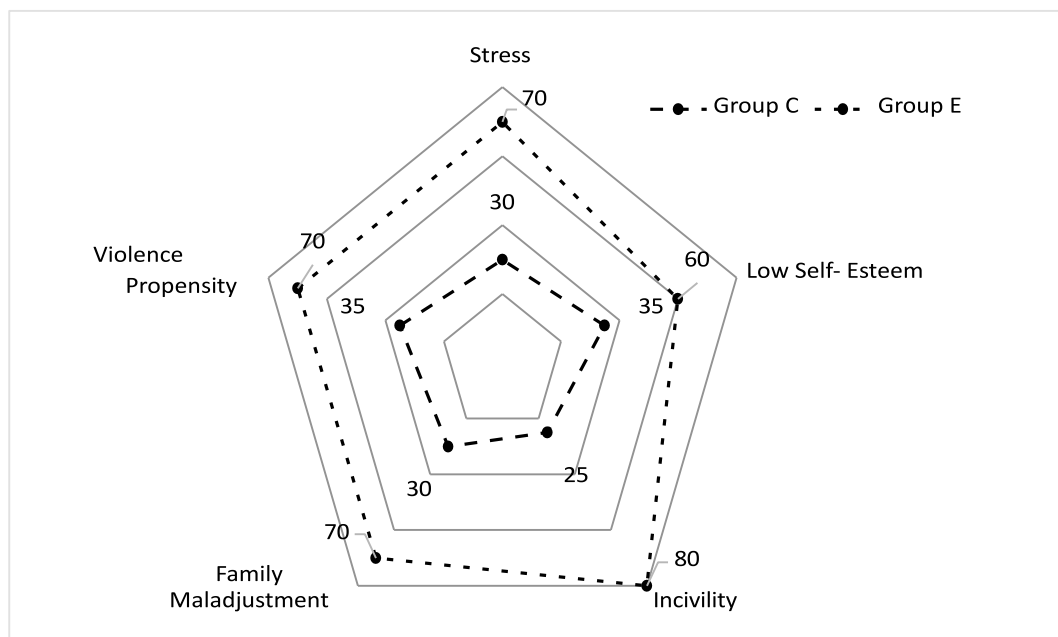
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Figure 1. Radar chart of percentiles obtained in the evaluated variables in the study group and the comparison group.

DISCUSSION

The research focused on analyzing maladaptive behaviors exhibited by school bullying perpetrators. A strong correlation is observed between aggressors, incivility, and a propensity for violent behavior. Given that school bullying involves a recurrent pattern of violent behavior, it is logical to expect this relationship [1]. Additionally, contributing to this phenomenon are immoral behaviors, the promotion of which is crucial both in the school environment and in the family setting, as they influence constant learning about authority and social norms [19]. This underscores the role of teachers in bullying prevention, not only being prepared to intervene but also to identify the profile of the aggressor and act more effectively [7]. Another indicator that defines the aggressor's profile is family maladjustment. Dysfunction in the family environment, leading to neglect of the child or adolescent, which can hinder their progress in the school stage due to the lack of necessary support. Moreover, facing problems at home can lead to maladaptive learning in the face of frustration, in line with Bandura's theory, where violence is learned and maintained as a form of adaptation. When the child lacks parental support, they experience an adaptive imbalance and may begin to exhibit aggressions or other behaviors associated with school bullying [20,21].

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Teachers also identify family dysfunction. In a study by Carmona (2021), teachers describe this dysfunction as the lack of parental involvement in meeting educational expectations, such as interest, family bonding, and discipline at home. This disinterest is related to what Enriquez et al. (2021) have mentioned, where adolescents exposed to a dysfunctional family environment tend to experience depression and emotional problems.

The research reveals a connection between low self-esteem and bullies, supporting the study by Cabrera and Salazar (2022). However, this low self-esteem appears to be more a consequence than a cause of the dysfunctional family environment, similar to bullying behavior, suggesting that both problems arise as a result of problematic family environments, although not directly. Regarding stress, school bullying perpetrators tend to have slightly higher than average levels. This data aligns with coping ability [22]. Nevertheless, stress can be associated with academic performance, as there is evidence of an inverse relationship between academic performance and bullying, leading to prolonged stress due to not meeting academic demands, which can result in distress [22,23].

By forming extreme groups of higher and lower scores on the bullying propensity scale, it has been clearly identified that adolescent subjects who definitively show a propensity for bullying exhibit higher levels of stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and a propensity for violence, with the highest and highly significant correlations in incivility and propensity for violence. It is suggested that studies focus on the psychological characteristics of the bullying aggressor, not just those of the victim, as addressing both aspects can provide more comprehensive and effective solutions. This comprehensive approach requires collaboration among teachers, family members, and educational

psychologists, who specialize in behavior and are closer to the problem. Their work would encompass the identification of family maladjustments to comprehensive education in civic and emotional values, focusing on stress management and self-esteem promotion to promote a violence-free culture.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of specific interventions in the field of public health. Programs focused on emotional and social education, as well as stress management and self-esteem, can be key in the prevention and treatment of school bullying. Teacher training in the identification and management of these behaviors is essential, as indicated in previous studies [24]. Additionally, collaboration between schools, families, and mental health professionals is crucial to address family maladjustments that can influence student behavior. These measures could not only reduce the prevalence of bullying but also improve the overall well-being of students, as evidenced in recent research [25].

The study has limitations, such as its descriptive nature, which prevents establishing causal relationships. Furthermore, the use of non-probabilistic sampling could limit the generalization of the results to other student populations. However, this study has significant strengths, including its comparative focus and the use of a large sample. These aspects provide a detailed view of differences in psychosocial behavior among students with different levels of bullying propensity.

CONCLUSION
This study highlights significant correlations between bullying propensity and factors such as stress, low self-esteem, incivility, family maladjustment, and propensity for violence in high school students. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive interventions in the school environment aimed at addressing these psychosocial aspects.

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