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**BULLYING AND SELF-ESTEEM AT STUDENTS IN  
ADOLESCENT AGE**

Specialty: 511.02 - Developmental and educational psychology

Abstract of PhD thesis in psychology

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## MAIN CONCEPTUAL LANDMARKS OF THE RESEARCH

**The topicality of the subject.** The paper entitled *Bullying and self-esteem at students in adolescent age*, addresses an issue of great interest among researchers in the field of social sciences, but also among politicians. As a theoretical problem, bullying research is in the humanistic direction of psychology, pedagogy and sociology, because it starts from the premise that the diminishing mental effects of bullying acts leads to the improvement of the human condition. "According to a report by the WHO, Romania ranks third out of 42 countries surveyed. But the report points out that the frequency of bullying increases with age. The report states that 17% of 11-year-olds admitted to bullying other pupils at least 3 times in the previous month, with the percentage rising to 23% for 13 and 15-year-olds." [48]. It is known that in a toxic environment dominated by aggression and bullying behaviour, victimised pupils will always suffer and face possible episodes of depression.

Anti-bullying programmes are based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1990), which states that "protection from abuse is an essential right for children, especially when considering the negative effects of bullying on both victims and aggressors".

In the research that we will present in this paper, we will focus on the relationship between bullying and students' self-esteem, with the intention of identifying a way to diminish the effects of bullying on the psyche of adolescents. Among the researchers who have participated in this debate we mention: Bălan, R., [2]; Debarbieux, É. [4]; Marsh, V.L. [11]; Menesini, E. [13]; Olweus, D. [16]; [17], [18]; Robu, V. [41], Rogers, C. R., [42], Ropotică [43], Smith, P. K. [47], Schmitt, D.P.; Allik, J. [46], Salmivalli, C. [44], [45].

### **Description of the situation in the research area and identification of the research problem**

Currently, the international literature on bullying is very diverse and rich. In the International Databases (BDI), a search for the terms bullying, self-esteem, adolescent identified 605 scientific

articles published in scientific journals and academic books indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection, 524 results for Scopus/ Elsevier, 3259 results for the SpringerLink Journals platform, 4175 results for the Science Direct/ Elsevier research platform. The relationship between bullying and self-esteem levels has also been investigated at universities in several academic centres around the world. The results obtained so far, influenced by the cultural particularities of the groups investigated, do not lead to a single conclusion. For example, in countries with authoritarian traditions certain results have been obtained, while in countries with democratic traditions, with decentralised organisation of society, relatively different results have been obtained. Some researchers have found only a negative correlation between self-esteem and victimhood, in that adolescents who are bullied have low self-esteem. At the same time, they are introverted, isolated, lonely and have difficulty integrating into the collective. Those with high self-esteem are not affected by the aggressive acts of potential bullies, who are known to choose their victims from among children and adolescents who are less resistant to such challenges. As for bullies, opinions are divided, some researchers have found them to have low self-esteem, others - on the contrary - have found bullies with medium and high self-esteem. Given the multiple concerns of researchers on the issue of bullying in schools and the effects on the involvement of adolescents in bullying acts, we believe that the topic of our research is highly topical both from a theoretical and practical point of view. By designing the experiment on psychoeducational intervention on the self-esteem of bullied students, we formulated the following **research question**: *What are the effective alternative strategies in psychoeducational intervention to increase the level of self-esteem as a determinant factor in decreasing victimization and the side effects of bullying psychological stress on students' mental health?*

**The purpose of the research:** Designing, interpreting and the experimental validation of a novel epistemic platform with reference to the study of the forms of manifestation of school bullying and its relation with the teens' self-esteem and traits of personality. Designing and implementing a psycho-educational intervention programme meant to raise the self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying.

**The aims of the research:** 1). Studying specialty literature regarding the theme of the research; 2). Establishing the research methods and techniques; 3). Investigating the forms of manifestation of school bullying and its relation with the level of self-esteem; 4). Establishing the connections between the traits of character and bullying according to variables: gender, sort of high school, residential environment; 5). Designing, implementing and validating a psycho-educational intervention programme whose objective is the development of self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying; 6). Drawing up conclusions and a set of recommendations about the management of the instances of bullying of adolescent students.

**The theoretical basis of the research.** The manifestation of bullying is significant at this transitional age, which is adolescence. Research on self-esteem among adolescents in Romania and the Republic of Moldova has been the focus of several authors: A. Băban (1998), I. Racu, (2014), Iu. Racu (2020, 2021), V. Gonța, (2003, 2006), D. Nastas (2002), L. Nacai (2020). Internationally, authors such as S. Coopersmith (1967), S. Moscovici (1994), L. Festinger (1954), S. Nelis & W. M. Bukowski (2019), T. Humphreys (2011), C. H. Cooley (2017) have been noted. Also, the issue of bullying aggression and the issue of self-esteem have been the focus of interest of authors such as Bălan & al. (2020) [2], É. Debarbieux (2010) [4]; V. L. Marsh (2018) [11]; E. Menesini & C. Salmivali (2017) [13]; D. Olweus (1993, 2013) [16]; [18], V. Robu [41], C. R. Rogers (2008) [42], E. E. Smith et al. (2010) [47], D. P. Schmitt and J. Allik (2005) [46], C. Salmivalli (2001, 2005) [43], [45].

**Scientific research methodology:** highlighting theoretical models and literature review; empirical methods: APRI-BT (Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument-Bully/Target) questionnaire; self-esteem measurement questionnaire (Rosenberg); EPQ (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire); statistical data processing methods using SPSS.20 : frequency analysis, calculation of Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient, calculation of Pearson's r correlation coefficient, statistical verification and validation tests: t-test for independent samples, Mann Whitney U nonparametric test for two independent samples, Wilcoxon nonparametric test for two paired samples.

**The novelty and scientific originality:** Using for the first time the APRI-BT scale at the national level in order to investigate the

intensity and dimension of bullying in adolescents; the research of certain aspects of the relation between the forms of bullying (intimidation and victimization), self-esteem and personality traits; designing and applying the psycho-educational intervention programme with a view to increasing self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying.

**The Results obtained that contribute to the solution of the main scientific problem** consist of highlighting the correlation between the level of self-esteem and the forms of bullying, the influence of personality traits on bullying behaviour, identifying the optimal strategies for developing self-esteem able to influence the decrease in the incidence of school bullying cases; the evaluation of the effect of the psycho-educational intervention programme on self-esteem in adolescents, victims of school bullying.

**The theoretical significance:** The results of this study completes the spectrum of existing knowledge in the field with a series of new approaches regarding the forms of manifestation of bullying in relation to the evolution of self-esteem and belonging to gender, sort of high school and residential environment.

**The practical value of the paper** consists in setting up the portraits of teenagers involved in acts of bullying and designing a psycho-educational intervention programme for the development of the self-esteem in adolescents affected by bullying; the intervention programme can form the basis of a methodological guide for the teachers of schools interested in solving this issue.

#### **Main scientific results submitted for presentation**

- Bullying present in the school environment has a negative role on personality development in adolescence with impact on mental and physical health, as well as on academic achievement and relationships with others.

- The existing correlations between self-esteem and bullying victimization variables led to the development and implementation of a psychoeducational intervention program aimed at increasing self-esteem in adolescents, victims of bullying;

- Through psycho-educational intervention we can observe and evaluate the effects of the program on the increase of self-esteem, on changes in the behaviour of adolescents in peer relationships, as well as the effects of the program on the level of bullying.

**Implementing the scientific results:** The materials derived from this research project have been used during the seminar activities of the DPPD students of the 'Lower Danube' University in Galati. The training programme was used in the training and preparation of psychologists, school counsellors from school offices of psycho pedagogical assistance.

**Approval of the research results:** the chapters of our research work were submitted for validation to the supervision committee of the Doctoral School of the State Pedagogical University "Ion Creanga". The materials resulting from the research are found in the elaboration and publication of 13 scientific articles in specialized journals and are reflected in 10 national and international scientific communications in the Republic of Moldova and Romania. We present below the list of these studies that were also used in our doctoral thesis:

1. Annual Scientific Conference "Current Issues in the Humanities." Scientific Proceedings of Doctoral Students and Competitors, 2019, *Systemic approach to bullying in adolescents (case study)*, volume 18, part 2, pp. 207-217;
2. International Scientific Conference "Perspectives and Problems of Integration into the European Research and Education Area" - Cahul, 6 June 2019. *Theoretical aspects of bullying in school environment*, volume 6, part II, pp. 119-123;
3. International Scientific Conference "Psychology in the Third Millennium - Challenges and Solutions", Balti, Republic of Moldova, 25-26 October 2019, *Self-esteem and bullying in adolescent students - family psychotherapeutic approach (case study)*, volume 1, 2020, pp. 148-152;
4. Republican Conference of Teachers, "Psychopedagogy and Educational Management", Tiraspol State University, Chisinau, 28-29 February 2020, *Bullying in adolescents: conceptual delimitations*, volume 5, pp. 130-133;
5. International Scientific Conference "Perspectives and Problems of Integration into the European Research and Education Area", 05 June 2020, Cahul, *Systemic approach to psychotherapeutic intervention in combating bullying in school adolescents (Case Study)*, vol.7, part II, pp. 130-135;

6. International Scientific Conference "Problems of socio-humanistic sciences and modernization of education", U.P.S. "Ion Creanga", Chisinau, 8-9 October 2020, *Dynamics of self-esteem in adolescents*, vol.1, pp. 317-323;
7. Annual Scientific Conference "Current Problems of Humanistic Sciences", Scientific Annals of Doctoral Students, Chisinau, UPS "Ion Creanga", May 2021, *An instrument to assess bullying behavior approved on teenage students in Romania*, vol.19, part II, pp. 301-309;
8. International Scientific Conference "Psychological Restructuring in Crisis", A.P.A.R., Brasov, 12-16 May 2021, XVI edition, *Psychopathy and bullying-type violence in adolescent students*, in vol. "Psychological Restructuring in Crisis", pp. 162-169 ;
9. International Scientific Conference "Institute of Education Sciences: ascension, performances, personalities", Chisinau, Republic of Moldova, 10 December 2021, *Self-esteem of adolescents involved in bullying relationships*, in the volume with the conference materials, pp. 208-212;
10. International Scientific Conference „Psychological assistance at the contemporary stage: realities and perspectives", U.S.A.R.B., Balti, Republic of Moldova, 22 October 2021, 2nd edition, *The diagnostic value of the objective assessment method in the identification of bullying cases in adolescent students*, volume with conference materials, pp. 81-89;
11. "Psychology - Scientific-Practical Journal", volume 38, no. 1-2, 2021, *Results of an observational study on school bullying*, pp. 67-79;
12. Psychology - Scientific-Practical Journal, no. 2, 2021, *Sociometric perspective in addressing the self-esteem of the student victim of school bullying*, pp. 47-57;
13. Akademos Magazine, no. 4 (67) 2022, *Psychological determinants of bullying behaviour in adolescents*, pp.110-115.

**Publications on the thesis topic:** the results obtained are published in 13 scientific papers: 3 articles in national and international scientific journals and 10 articles in national and international conference volumes as well as in scientific conference materials.



**Volume and structure of the thesis:** The thesis consists of: annotations in 3 languages (Romanian, Russian, English), list of abbreviations, introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, bibliography of 208 titles, 21 appendices, 138 pages of basic text, 15 figures and 30 tables.

**Keywords:** bullying, intimidation, victimisation, self-esteem, aggression.

## THESIS CONTENT

**The Introduction** argues the topicality and importance of the thesis, the description of the situation in the field of research, the exposition of the aim, objectives, hypothesis of the research, the results obtained that contribute to the solution of the scientific problem, the scientific novelty and originality, the theoretical significance of the research, as well as the applicative value of the work, the approval and implementation of the research results.

In **Chapter I** entitled "Theoretical background on bullying and self-esteem", we address the basic concepts of the research, namely the concept of bullying and the concept of self-esteem. It also presents the main explanatory theories concerning the psycho-social characteristics of bullying, personality traits and bullying behaviour, the characteristics of bullying in adolescents, self-esteem - personality trait or state? Bullying is a psycho-social problem that manifests itself as an expression of the aggressive impulses of the human being. It is less present among young schoolchildren, then increasingly in secondary school classes, in parallel with the manifestation of the crisis specific to puberty and adolescence, it is also present in the first classes of secondary school, moderating to some extent towards the end of secondary school. Studies that have focused on this issue have concluded that bullying violence can be managed if schools get involved and implement programmes to reduce it. Evidence that such programmes are achieving their goal can be seen in the declining figures for the reduction in bullying in schools in the USA and probably also in other areas where the problem of bullying in schools has been taken seriously and comprehensive programmes have been initiated to counter it. For a long time, bullying has not attracted the attention of education specialists, although it has always been present in schools. It is only in the last half-century or so that educators have become aware of the negative effects of this type of behaviour and started to study it. Longitudinal research has highlighted a number of personality disorders developed among the victims of these aggressive acts (high incidence of depressive disorders, frequency of suicidal

ideation, social adjustment difficulties), but also among the perpetrators of bullying (alcohol or drug abuse, criminal behaviour). All these are reasons why bullying-type behaviours have attracted the attention of specialists and stimulated them to design programmes to reduce their incidence. We proceeded in our research from the premise that between the two sides of bullying behaviour, harassment-intimidation and victimisation (in English bullying and victimization) and the level of self-esteem may be causally related. We have therefore treated, in a first assessment, self-esteem as an independent variable according to which bullying and victimization can be seen as dependent variables. The literature consulted does not provide a consensual view on this issue, especially if we consider the relationship between self-esteem levels and incitement to bullying. On the other hand, many authors (Rosenberg, Olweus, Salmivalli) are inclined to the view that low self-esteem favours victimisation in incidents of school violence.

In **Chapter II**, entitled "Investigating the relationship between bullying, self-esteem and personality traits in adolescents", we considered the research methodology, the research hypotheses, the variables involved in the observational experiment, the description of the sample, the psychological samples administered, the results obtained, the extent to which they confirm the hypotheses, the conclusions regarding the confirmation of the hypotheses based on statistical data.

**The aim of the observational research** is to identify the types of relationships between self-esteem, forms of bullying and personality traits in adolescents according to gender, high school profile and residential environment variables.

**The objectives** of the research are: 1. To investigate the link between the level of self-esteem and forms of bullying; 2. To investigate the influence of predictors (biological gender, high school profile and residential environment) on the condition of bully or victim of bullying; 3. Highlighting personality traits for adolescents involved in bullying aggression and their victims.

**The general hypothesis** of the research is the assumption that there are correlations between the level of self-esteem and bullying/harassment and victimization from bullying. Bullying/harassment and bullying victimization behavior in adolescents is influenced by self-esteem level, personality traits,

biological gender, and external factors: high school profile and residential environment. From the general hypothesis we have put forward the following **working hypotheses**: Hypothesis 1: We assume that there are significant correlations between self-esteem and general bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying. Hypothesis 2: We assume that there are significant correlations between self-esteem and general victimization, verbal victimization, social victimization and physical victimization. Hypothesis 3: We assume that there are gender differences in general bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying. Hypothesis 4: Assume that there are gender differences in general victimization, verbal victimization, social victimization and physical victimization. Hypothesis 5: We assume that there are differences by secondary school stream (theoretical, technological) in general bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying. Hypothesis 6: We assume that there are differences by secondary school stream in terms of general victimisation, verbal victimisation, social victimisation and physical victimisation. Hypothesis 7: We assume that there are differences by background in general bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying. Hypothesis 8: Assume that there are differences by residence in general victimization, verbal victimization, social victimization and physical victimization. Hypothesis 9: We assume that there are significant correlations between personality traits and general bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and physical bullying. Hypothesis 10: We assume that there are significant correlations between personality traits and general victimization, verbal victimization, social victimization and physical victimization.

**Variables in the observational experiment:**

**Independent variables:** self-esteem; personality traits; biological gender, high school affiliation, residence environment.

**Dependent variables:** general bullying/harassment and its dimensions: verbal bullying/harassment; social bullying/harassment; bullying/physical harassment; general victimisation and its dimensions: verbal victimisation; social victimisation; physical victimisation.

**The experimental instruments and techniques** were: APRI- BT questionnaire (measuring bullying in school communities), Self-esteem measurement questionnaire (Rosenberg), EPQ personality test.

**Results of the observational research:** 286 high school students participated in the sample research, of which 124 were girls (43.4%) and 162 were boys (56.6%). According to the criterion of residence environment, the group of subjects consisted of 74 rural students (25.9%) and 212 urban students (74.1%). Differentiated according to the stream of high school, the group of subjects contains 150 students from the technological stream (52.4%) and 136 students from the theoretical stream (47.6%). According to the class variable, the group of subjects contains 93 students from the 9th grade (32.5%), 107 students from the 10th grade (37.4%) and 86 students from the 11th grade (30.1%). According to the age criterion, the group of subjects contains 96 students aged 15 (33.6%), 95 students aged 16 (33.2%), 87 students aged 17 (30.4%) and 8 students aged 18 (2.8%). To test **hypotheses 1 and 2**, the Pearson correlation coefficient  $r$  was calculated [31;75]. Self-esteem correlates negatively with overall victimization, showing a statistically significant ( $r = - 0.480, p < 0.01$ ), medium-sized negative correlation [27;210], which means that students with low levels of self-esteem will have high levels of overall victimization and those with high levels of self-esteem will have low levels of victimization. Negative correlations of medium magnitude also hold for the forms of victimization: verbal ( $r = - 0.471, p < 0.01$ ), social ( $r = - 0.461, p < 0.01$ ) and physical ( $r = 0.341, p < 0.01$ ). To test **hypotheses 3 and 4**, we applied the t-test for independent samples with biological gender as the independent variable and general bullying (verbal, social, physical) and general victimization (verbal, social, physical) as the dependent variables. The data show that there are statistically significant differences between boys and girls in physical bullying/physical intimidation [ $t(284) = 3.469, p < 0.01$ ], in that boys score higher on physical intimidation than girls. There are also statistically significant differences between boys and girls in general victimization [ $t(284) = 2.060, p < 0.05$ ], boys score higher on the general victimization variable than girls; there are no statistically significant differences between boys and girls in verbal victimization [ $t(284) = 1.391, p > 0.05$ ] and social victimization [ $t(284) = 0.975, p > 0.05$ ]; in contrast, there are statistically significant differences between boys and girls in physical victimization [ $t(284) = 3.534, p < 0.01$ ].

To test **hypotheses 5 and 6**, the independent samples t-test was applied, with high school track as the independent variable and

general bullying (verbal, social, physical) and general victimization (verbal, social, physical) as the dependent variables. Statistically significant differences were found between students in the theoretical and technological streams in terms of physical bullying [ $t(284) = 4.878, p < 0.01$ ], with students in the technological stream having higher scores.

Statistically significant differences were observed in overall victimization [ $t(284) = 3.673, p < 0.01$ ], with technology students scoring higher in overall victimization than theory students. The same is true for verbal victimization [ $t(284) = 2.986, p < 0.01$ ], social victimization [ $t(284) = 2.545, p < 0.05$ ] and physical victimization [ $t(284) = 4.608, p < 0.01$ ].

To test **Hypothesis 7 and Hypothesis 8**, the independent variable was the residence environment and the dependent variables were general bullying (also verbal, social, physical) and general victimization (also verbal, social, physical). It was found that rural adolescents scored higher on physical bullying than urban adolescents, and also scored higher on general victimization, verbal victimization and physical victimization.

To test **Hypothesis 9 and Hypothesis 10** we calculated Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients (see Table 1), on the basis of which we judge that there is a positive, weak, statistically significant correlation between extraversion and general bullying, participants with high tendencies towards extraversion show high tendencies to engage in acts of aggression through bullying. Teens who engage in bullying are generally extroverted beings, characterised by boldness, a preference for sensation, and a tendency to dominate. However, no significant correlation was found between extraversion and victimisation. There was a positive, weak, statistically significant correlation ( $r = 0.210, p < 0.01$ ) between psychoticism and general bullying, with the correlation also evident for verbal, social and physical bullying. A weak, statistically significant, positive correlation is observed between psychoticism and social victimization from bullying, with participants with high tendencies to psychoticism scoring high on social victimization [32;113]. A weak, statistically significant positive correlation is found between neuroticism and verbal bullying, [32;113] but also between neuroticism and general victimization, verbal victimization ( $r = 0.170, p < 0.05$ ) and social victimization, ( $r = 0.150, p < 0.05$ ) [32;114]. It was also observed that a statistically significant,

weak positive correlation also existed between behavioural deviance and general bullying, social bullying, verbal bullying and physical bullying ( $r = 0.153$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). There is a weak positive correlation between behavioural deviance and general victimization ( $r = 0.191$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), verbal victimization ( $r = 0.197$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and social victimization ( $r = 0.206$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). But no statistically significant correlation was found between behavioural deviance and physical victimization. [32;114].

Analysing the data on the correlations between bullying/bullying, victimization and their dimensions on the one hand and dissimulation on the other hand (Table 1) shows that dissimulation correlates negatively with general bullying ( $r = -0.203$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), verbal bullying ( $r = -0.278$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), physical bullying. Undoubtedly, the existence in the sample of a significant number of participants with high values on the dissimulation indicator is an important distorting factor.

**Table1. Pearson's r correlation coefficients between the EPQ personality traits and bullying and victimisation**

Variable	Extraversion	Psychoticism	Neuroticism	Deviance	Dissimulation
General bullying	<b>0.125*</b>	<b>0.210**</b>	0.115	<b>0.179**</b>	<b>-0.203**</b>
Verbal bullying	0.112	<b>0.175**</b>	<b>0.131*</b>	<b>0.166**</b>	<b>-0.278**</b>
Social bullying	0.067	<b>0.189**</b>	0.082	<b>0.146*</b>	<b>-0.064</b>
Physical bullying	<b>0.145*</b>	<b>0.186**</b>	0.080	<b>0.153**</b>	<b>-0.162**</b>
General victimisation	-0.060	0.100	<b>0.147*</b>	<b>0.191*</b>	-0.032
Verbal victimisation	-0.060	0.087	<b>0.170**</b>	<b>0.197**</b>	-0.075
Social victimisation	-0.064	<b>0.125*</b>	<b>0.150*</b>	<b>0.206**</b>	0.040
Physical victimisation	-0.034	0.051	0.059	0.093	-0.052

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

In Chapter III entitled "*Development of self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying*" we describe the strategies, principles and techniques used in group counselling, which formed the basis of the psycho-educational intervention programme aimed at raising self-esteem levels in order to reduce the temptation to bully peers and decrease feelings of victimisation.

**The aim of the formative experiment** was to develop and implement a psycho-educational intervention program to increase self-esteem in adolescent students who are victims of school bullying.

**The general objectives** were focused on the development of personal and social skills in order to optimise self-perception in different life contexts: 1) Design and implementation of a psycho-educational intervention programme for students with low and average self-esteem, victims of school bullying; 2) Evaluation of the effects and validation of the psycho-educational intervention programme; 3) Development of conclusions and recommendations.

**Independent variable:** is the psycho-educational intervention programme for students with low self-esteem, victims of bullying.

**Dependent variables:** 1) Self-esteem; 2) Perceived level of victimization; 3) Perceived level of bullying/harassment; 4) Personality traits (extroversion, psychoticism, neuroticism, behavioral deviance, dissimulation).

**The hypothesis of the formative experiment** was the assumption that by implementing the formative psychoeducational intervention program the level of self-esteem in bullied students will be increased. The formative experiment was conducted on a group of 30 participants, 15 of whom were part of the experimental group and the remaining 15 were part of the control group. Aged between 15 and 18, the participants are IX-XI graders in the same high school. The overall average age of the participants was 16 years and 46 months (standard deviation = 0.94). The experimental group (EG) consisted of 15 adolescents (8 girls and 7 boys) with low and medium self-esteem and high levels of victimization. The Adolescents in the experimental group participated in the psychoeducational intervention program focused on group intervention for a period of three months. The control group (CG) also consisted of 15 adolescents (8 girls and 7 boys) comparable to the experimental group in terms of statistics, age, gender, self-esteem, level of victimization.



### **Evaluation of the psycho-educational intervention programme**

With a view to scientifically validating the psychoeducational intervention program, the participants in the experimental and control groups were retested by using the same tests carried out during the observational study (Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg), APRI-BT Scale, EPQ Questionnaire (Eysenck Personality Questionnaire) with the following personality variables: extroversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, behavioural deviance and tendency to dissimulation).

#### **Descriptive analysis and interpretation of results**

The interpreting of the statistical test results upon re-testing 30 students was based on the following statistical tests, appropriated to small sample sizes: the Mann-Whitney U non-parametric test for two independent samples; the Wilcoxon non-parametric test for two paired samples.

#### **The effect of the formative experiment on the self-esteem increase for adolescents in the experimental group**

The Wilcoxon non-parametric test was carried out in order to statistically validate the final results. The latter indicate that there are significant differences between self-esteem before the intervention and self-esteem after the intervention ( $z = - 3.410$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results obtained by the adolescents included in the psychoeducational intervention program demonstrate its effectiveness, thus checking the stated hypothesis.

#### **The effect of the intervention program on self-esteem, differentiated for girls and boys, in the experimental group**

To demonstrate the effect of the intervention program, the Wilcoxon non-parametric test was carried out. Results indicate that:

In girls, there are significant differences in self-esteem, both prior and ulterior to the intervention ( $z = - 2.524$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Similarly, there are significant differences in self-esteem in boys, both prior and ulterior to the intervention ( $z = - 2.366$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Results indicate that in both cases, i.e. boys ( $r = .894$ ) and girls ( $r = .892$ ), the intervention program had a considerable impact in boosting self-esteem.

#### **The effect of the formative experiment on perception levels of bullying**

The personal self-worth achieved during the group counselling sessions helped victim students build relationships much more easily in the peer group as well as more effectively respond to the verbal attacks of the bullies, thus marking a decrease in the level of

victimisation and even in the overall bullying score, both physical and verbal, as an indirect effect of the psychological intervention on the victim students. The difference resulted between the average scores for victimization and bullying during the GE test and GE retests can only be explained by the fact that adolescents have finally learned to understand their emotions, identify cognitive distortions, and understand messages from their peers. As it seems, the family support received during the intervention programme, i.e. exercises to be done as home assignments by the participating students, contributed to a better understanding of the self, as well as to a better relationship with others and an effective management of conflicting situations. Likewise, by getting involved in group sessions, adolescents succeeded in better building relationships with others, especially with their peers, acquiring thus a better tolerance to peer taunting and a higher tolerance to frustration, which lead to a decrease in victimization.

The Wilcoxon non-parametric test was chosen for the statistical validation. Running the intervention program leads to a significant decrease in the verbal abuse/bullying, physical abuse/bullying and taunting/bullying total score. The implementation of the intervention programme also leads to a significant decrease in verbal victimisation, social victimisation, physical victimisation and total score victimisation. It can be observed that the intervention program has an average effect in reducing social bullying ( $p = .109, r = .414$ ), a strong effect in reducing verbal abuse/ bullying ( $p = .039; r = .532$ ), physical bullying ( $p = .042; r = .525$ ) and total score bullying ( $p = .027; r = .570$ ) as well as a very strong effect in the decrease of verbal victimization ( $p = .001; r = .852$ ), social victimization, ( $p = .001; r = .822$ ), physical victimization ( $p = .005; r = .729$ ) and total score victimization ( $p = .001; r = .880$ ).

### **The effect of the formative experiment on personality traits**

Analysis of Table 2 shows that the intervention programme on personality traits has an average effect on decreasing neuroticism (even though statistically insignificant), a strong effect on increasing extroversion and dissimulation, a strong effect on decreasing behavioural deviance and a very strong effect on decreasing psychoticism.

**Table 2. Wilcoxon test results comparing personality traits prior and ulterior to the intervention in the experimental group**

Variables	Sum of ranks (SR)		z	p	r
	Negative ranks, after < before	Positive ranks, after > before			
Extroversion	0	15	$z = -2.236$	$p = .025$	.577
Psychoticism	118.5	1.5	$z = -3.385$	$p = .001$	.874
Neuroticism	62.5	15.5	$z = -1.876$	$p = .061$	.484
Behavioural deviance	66	12	$z = -2.169$	$p = .030$	.560
Dissimulation	4	41	$z = -2.308$	$p = .021$	.596

Comparisons between initial and final testing for students in the control group

Likewise, in order to catch the impact of the formative experiment, the data of the adolescents in the control group in the initial test (GC test) were compared against the data in the final test (GC retest). Firstly, comparisons were made between baseline and endline testing for participants in the control group for self-esteem. According to the results presented in Table 3, it can be seen that for the control group, the value of self-esteem in the initial test is equal to that in the final test both overall and differentiated, for girls and boys. The psychoeducational intervention program to increase self-esteem was the condition without which positive changes would not have been achieved for adolescent students.

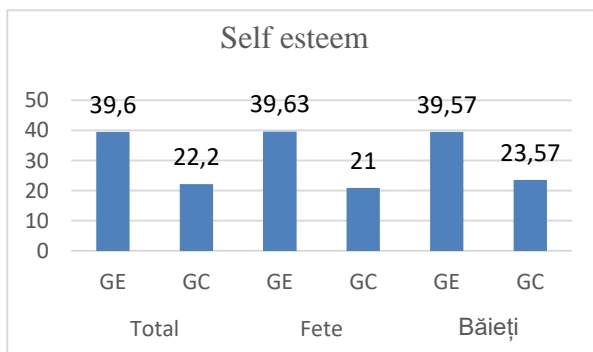
**Table 3. Self-esteem average values for the control group prior and ulterior to the formative experiment, both overall and differentiated for girls and boys**

Variable	Total		Girls		Boys	
	before	after	before	after	before	after
Self esteem	22	22	21	21	23.57	23.57

Here is the statistical argument of the comparison between test and retest in terms of bullying (abuse and victimization) for students in the control group. The analysis of the data shows that there are no significant differences between baseline and endline testing for the variables: bullying - verbal abuse ( $z = -1.890$ ,  $p > .05$ ), taunting - social bullying ( $z = -1.342$ ,  $p > .05$ ), bullying - physical abuse ( $z = -1.890$ ,  $p > .05$ ), verbal victimization ( $z = -1.342$ ,  $p > .05$ ), social victimization ( $z = -1.342$ ,  $p > .05$ ), physical victimization ( $z = -0.816$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and victimization total score ( $z = -1.836$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Next, we tested for statistically significant differences between baseline and post-testing in terms of personality traits; in the control group, the Wilcoxon non-parametric test was applied. Results show that there are no significant differences between baseline and endline testing for extroversion ( $z = -1.000$ ,  $p > .05$ ), neuroticism ( $z = -1.633$ ,  $p > .05$ ), behavioural deviance ( $z = -1.633$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and dissimulation ( $z = -0.447$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, it can be observed that there are differences between baseline and endline testing only in the case of psychoticism ( $z = -2.611$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which decreases from baseline to endline testing, a difference that is maintained only for girls.

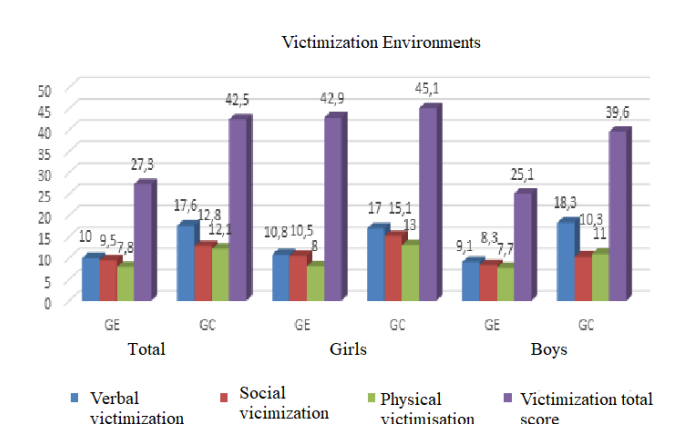
#### **Comparisons between GE (experimental group) and GC (control group) in the final test**

From the analysis of the results we can observe significant differences in the average score obtained in self-esteem, victimization and bullying for GE and GC after the application of the formative experiment, as follows: Self-esteem: In girls, GC/ retest - 21 (average units) and GE/ retest - 39.63 (average units); In boys, GC/ retest - 23.57 (average units) and GE/ retest - 39.57 (average units). The results expressed in Figure 1 indicate that, statistically, there are significant differences between experimental and control groups in self-esteem. The students' participation in the intervention program changed their self-appraisal in the sense that high scores were recorded in self-esteem.



**Figure 1. Comparative presentation of the average values of self-esteem for (GE) and (GC) after participation in the formative experiment, overall and differentiated by gender**

Upon re-running the Rosenberg scale it was observed that the students who took part in group counselling sessions, with a view to increasing their self-esteem, expressed greater confidence in their own strengths.(Fig.2) Analysis of the quantitative data shows lower occurrence of verbal and physical victimization and a decrease in overall victimization in both boys and girls.



**Figure 2. Comparative presentation of the average values of victimization (GE) and (GC) after participation in the formative experiment, overall and differentiated by gender**

The present research started from the premise that carrying out an experiment focused on increasing self-esteem and decreasing victimization has positive effects on adolescents, victims of bullying. The results obtained confirm the hypothesis and scientifically validate the psychoeducational intervention programme.

### **General conclusions and recommendations**

A retrospective look at our investigative approach highlights the following conclusions:

1. Firstly, the present study, primarily focuses attention on the first two categories of actors, with a more significant focus on the victims, given that, in the long run, the psychological effects of the specific experiential experiences of those who suffer offenses or other aggressions from peers, over a long period of time, lead to psychological trauma in the spectrum of depressive disorders;

2. Secondly, the hypothesis that self-esteem indirectly influences victimisation was tested, in the sense that high self-esteem leads to low victimisation;

3. In our empirical research (Chapter II) we used an instrument to measure the intensity of bullying (harassing and victimization), the APRI-BT scale, proposed by the Australian researcher Roberto H. Parada in 2000. Given the general hypothesis of the title of our work regarding the existence of a correlation between the intensity of the manifestations of bullying as well as the victimization behaviour and the level of self-esteem, we also used the self-esteem scale proposed by the researcher Rosenberg. Assuming, by hypothesis, that personality traits also influence the drive towards harassment or the experience of victim-hood, we also applied the EPQ scale;

4. Among the personality traits influencing the impulse towards bullying/harassment there were psychoticism, neuroticism and extroversion, while towards victim-hood there were neuroticism and introversion;

5. All these instruments were used during the tests run on high school students from three schools (two urban and one rural), boys and girls, enrolled in one theoretical high school and two school groups, one urban and one rural. The selected sample comprised in 286 pupils;

6. The sample research revealed a negative correlation between self-esteem levels and feelings of victimisation. The fact that victim-hood is compatible with low self-esteem has been noted by many

researchers, for which our investigation only provided further evidence to this observation;

7. In the third chapter of our paper, we tested the hypothesis that a psycho-educational intervention programme can lead to improved self-esteem in adolescents in the target group, boosting self-esteem, which will then act as a protective shield against bullying and harassment by peers inclined to such acts.

In order to carry out such a verification, we organized an experimental set-up, with an experimental and a control group (formative experiment) and carried out complex psycho-educational activities (counselling and psychotherapy), focusing on the principles of cognitive-behavioural counselling and psychotherapy.

During the retest which was carried out one year after the initial test, there was an observable improvement in the parameters considered, relating to self-esteem. Moreover, an improvement in personality traits was also noted to have decreased values for some personality traits (psychoticism, neuroticism and behavioural deviance) and respectively increased values for extroversion. It is true that there was also an increase in the values for dissimulation in the sense that the respondents' interest to come out in the most acceptable light and be assessed as such increased from test to retest. This success reinforces the optimism of those who believe that bullying is not inevitable and can be kept under control by education professionals.

### **Future research directions**

1. To test the hypothesis according to which in adolescent peer groups with high intellectual resources and coming from families with a high economic status, young people with an urge to bully their peers are characterized by high self-esteem.

2. The second proposal would be studying the influence of the future new school groups that will comprise in former middle school school graduates who have been bullies or victims of bullying soon after their enrolment in secondary schools.

3. The third direction of the research would be studying the personality of adolescent high school students previously affected by engaging with bullying (abuse, victimization) and the extent to which they were affected by bullying in preadolescence (middle school).

Drawing on the experience gained through our investigative approach, we hereby make some recommendations:

1. School management needs to be made aware of the importance and urgency of intervening to supervise bullying in schools. Together with teachers and school counsellors, school managers can organise anti-bullying assessment programmes, at school level, by resorting to various tools such as the questionnaires proposed and validated by D. Olweus or R. H. Parada. Once the incidence assessment has been carried out, we recommend that, in collaboration with the school psychologist, counselling and psychotherapy programmes be initiated, particularly with pupils who are victims of bullying, in order to improve their self-esteem.

2. We recommend that the management of the County Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance (C.J.R.A.E.) in Romania, include in their annual managerial plans, programs to combat bullying in schools, by organising training sessions for staff responsible with school psychology. The suggestions we have forwarded in this paper, both those aimed at detecting cases of bullying and those concerning intervention programmes to raise the self-esteem of victimised pupils, can be communicated through the publications managed by the resource centres.



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## ANNOTATION

### Popa Rodica. Bullying and self-esteem in adolescent students Psychology PhD Thesis. Chişinău, 2023

**The Structure of the thesis:** The thesis consists of: annotations in three languages (Romanian, Russian, English), the list of abbreviations, an introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, a bibliography of 208 titles, 21 annexes, 138 core text pages, 15 figures and 30 tables. The results of the research have been published in 13 scientific papers.

**Key-words:** bullying, intimidation, victimization, self-esteem, aggressiveness.

**Field of study:** Educational Psychology. The psychological peculiarities of the adolescents involved in school bullying.

**The purpose of the research:** Designing, interpreting and the experimental validation of a novel epistemic platform with reference to the study of the forms of manifestation of school bullying and its relation with the teens' self-esteem and traits of personality. Designing and implementing a psycho-educational intervention programme meant to raise the self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying.

**The aims of the research:** 1). Studying specialty literature regarding the theme of the research; 2). Establishing the research methods and techniques; 3). Investigating the forms of manifestation of school bullying and its relation with the level of self-esteem; 4). Establishing the connections between the traits of character and bullying according to variables: gender, sort of high school, residential environment; 5). Designing, implementing and validating a psycho-educational intervention programme whose objective is the development of self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying; 6). Drawing up conclusions and a set of recommendations about the management of the instances of bullying of adolescent students.

**The Results obtained that contribute to the solution of the main scientific problem** consist of highlighting the correlation between the level of self-esteem and the forms of bullying, the influence of personality traits on bullying behaviour, identifying the optimal strategies for developing self-esteem able to influence the decrease in the incidence of school bullying cases; the evaluation of the effect of the psycho-educational intervention programme on self-esteem in adolescents, victims of school bullying.

**The novelty and scientific originality:** Using for the first time the APRI-BT scale at the national level in order to investigate the intensity and dimension of bullying in adolescents; the research of certain aspects of the relation between the forms of bullying (intimidation and victimization), self-esteem and personality traits; designing and applying the psycho-educational intervention programme with a view to increasing self-esteem in adolescent students, victims of bullying.

**The theoretical significance:** The results of this study completes the spectrum of existing knowledge in the field with a series of new approaches regarding the forms of manifestation of bullying in relation to the evolution of self-esteem and belonging to gender, sort of high school and residential environment.

**The practical value of the paper** consists in setting up the portraits of teenagers involved in acts of bullying and designing a psycho-educational intervention programme for the development of the self-esteem in adolescents affected by bullying; the intervention programme can form the basis of a methodological guide for the teachers of schools interested in solving this issue.

**Implementing the scientific results:** The materials derived from this research project have been used during the seminar activities of the DPPD students of the 'Lower Danube' University in Galati. The training programme was used in the training and preparation of psychologists, school counselors from school offices of psycho pedagogical assistance.

**POPA RODICA**

**BULLYING AND SELF-ESTEEM AT STUDENTS IN  
ADOLESCENT AGE**

**Specialty: 511.02 - DEVELOPMENTAL AND EDUCATIONAL  
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