

## STUDENTS' FAMILY AND VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

Feliciano H. Veiga  
University of Lisbon

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the relation between the adolescents' orientation toward violence in schools and variables of the familiar context — parents (un)employment, divorce, socio-cultural status (SCS), parent authority, brothers' friendship, familiar self-concept —, as well as the variations of that relation according to the variable "perceived parental support". Subjects were 649 students, of both sexes, from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Several scales of assessment were used: The Adolescents' Violence in Schools Scale (AVS); the Perceived Parental Support Scale (PSS); an instrument to assess the familiar self-concept, with some items of the Piers-Harris Children Self-concept Scale. Significant differences were found between violence in schools of adolescent's groups with low and high perceived parental support, authoritarian and understanding parents, with high, middle and low SCS, without and with brothers' friendship and with low and high familiar self-concept — being these differences favourable to the last group. The results were in waited sense, with higher violence in students with adverse familiar contexts. The results were discussed and collated with previous studies.

Key-words: Violence in schools; Family; Adolescence

### INTRODUCTION

In several studies about adolescents violence in schools (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Branje, Lieshout, & Axen, 2005; Malete, 2007; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007; Veiga, 2008), it is undefined that, although extremely violent acts are not very common, aggressive behaviours are observed in most schools. Studies conducted in Portugal (Amado & Freire, 2002; Estrela & Ferreira, 2002) show that about 30% of young students have problems of transgression and aggression in schools and that these behaviours are difficult to handle by teachers and other education professionals (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Malete, 2007; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003). We have few studies on family variables that differentiate violent students from non-violent ones. There is a lack of evaluation instruments for constructs placed within the same variables. The *general purpose* of this investigation was the analysis of the rela-

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tion between adolescents violence in schools and several variables placed within familiar context — parents (un)employment, familiar cohesion (divorce or separation versus union), SCS, parent authority, brothers friendship, familiar self-concept —, as well as the variations of that relation in comparison with the variable "perceived parental support".

In studies conducted on variables like these, it was found hole and inconsistency in the knowledge of the relation among them (Amado & Freire, 2002; Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003). Since violence in schools is frequently considered as one of the biggest sources of stress for teachers and students (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003), it makes sense to investigate familiar factors associated with violence in school context. The aspects formerly presented lead to the following *general problem*: *Does perceived parental support significantly influence the relation between adolescents' violence in schools and the familiar context?* It seems defensible that an eventual interest in the implementation of programmes for the prevention of violence in schools should be based on the previous study of the relations between this variable and its constraints.

School violence and other variables. In a study about *bullying*, conducted in England (Whitney et al., 1992), 14% of primary students and 37% of secondary students declared they had been victims of aggression from their schoolmates. Students with need of specific educational assistance were among the first victims, followed by others with special characteristics, such as dyslexia and other problems — used by the aggressors as a pretext for the victimization (Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007; Nickerson et al., 2008; Pereira, Mendonça, Neto, Valente & Smith, 2004; Qing, 2006).

The reviewed studies refer to a significant association of violence in schools with parental violence (Truscott, 1992; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003), with familiar aggression (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Musitu & Cava, 2002), with parents unemployment (Brownfield, 1987), with drug addiction (Valois et al., 1993; Veiga, 2001), with a low academic self-esteem (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Musitu & Cava, 2002; Truscott, 1992; Valois et al., 1993), with heavy academic demands from teachers (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003) and with situations of tension between teachers and parents (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Musitu & Cava, 2002). Some studies (Neighbors et al., 1992) have found statistical significant differences between school performance of adolescents with divorced parents and non-divorced ones, showing higher performance levels the ones from the last group. Other studies (Tschann et al., 1989; Veiga, 2001) show that, when divorced parents have good relationship with their children, these are more resourceful in social adaptation.

Others factors associated with adolescents' violence are analyzed, such as drug and alcohol abuse, over-stimulation, depression, suicide, bad familiar environment and poor economic conditions. Among the major violence predictors there is the familiar criminality (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Malet, 2007; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007).

In studies conducted in Portugal (Veiga, 2007), it was shown that adolescents' adaptation to school has statistically significant co-relations with the perceived support, whether it is from the family or from the teachers. The explanation for the non-aggressiveness of the adolescents with perceived parental support may be explained by the direct social support model — as they have more direct parental support, these adolescents are more protected from incoming adversities of school environment and, accordingly, they do not present a tendency to be violent in school.

Other studies have focused on implementation of programmes for the prevention of violence in schools (Martin & Marsh, 2008; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003), or intervention in the community schools (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Cowie et al., 1992; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003) or in the students victims of violent acts themselves (Cowie et al., 1992; Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007; Whitney et al., 1992). Other authors systematize important generic recommendations, such as: to promote effective human relations between teachers and students; to increase the co-operation between teachers, and between teachers and students' families, both victims and aggressors; to underline significantly students successes; and to promote the assertiveness of aggressors and victims (Cowie et al., 1992; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003).

Some authors (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Olweus, 1992; Veiga, 2008) use as reference the theory of social learning to explain the influence of familiar educational practices in the development of children aggressiveness. If they have at home a parental authority based on physical punishment and generally aggressive behaviours, may lead, by modeling effect, to learning that aggressiveness is an acceptable method to solve problems and conflicts. Through reciprocal reinforcement effects, children and parents may learn to use coercive control techniques (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003).

Despite the large amount of studies published, the lack of consistency on studies on bullying and victimization, whether in a conceptual level or in a result one, is well underlined by several authors (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007; Malet, 2007; Nickerson et al., 2008; Qing, 2006; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007; Veiga, 2008) that suggest further investigation. The studies already conducted are more descriptive in what bullying is concerned than in the influence of specific factors. Therefore, the lack of studies on adolescent's violence in schools according to familiar context variables has lead to the present study.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The *population* was formed by adolescent students, of both sex and from Lisbon schools. The *sample* was constituted by 649 subjects, from 7th, 8th and 9th grades. The constitution of the sample was based on the method of probabilistic sampling by chunking.

### Instruments

To evaluate the different variables of the present study, we used the following instruments, all of them with good liability indexes (Alpha coefficients).

The *Adolescents' Violence in Schools Scale* (AVS) had seven items, extracted from the Disruptive Behaviour Scale Professed by Students (Veiga, 2008): 1. *I destroy or break intentionally school material*; 2. *I attack physically the schoolmates*; 3. *I attack verbally the teachers*; 4. *I swear in the classroom*; 5. *I attack verbally the teachers*; 6. *I attack verbally the schoolmates*; 7. *I threaten people at school*. The answers are *Lickert* type (from 1, entirely disagree, to 6, entirely agree). For the global sample, the alpha was 0.83.

The *Perceived Parental Support Scale* (PSS) has five items: 1. *My father has interest in my school work*; 2. *My mother has interest in my school work*; 3. *My parents think I am a clever student*; 4. *My father likes my friends*; 5. *My mother likes my friends*. The first three items refer to parents' interest on their children school activity, and the last two to the interest on their children friends. The answers are *Lickert* type (from 1, entirely disagree, to 4, entirely agree). For the global sample, the alpha was 0.74.

To evaluate brothers friendship, we used the item *My brothers are my friends*, with *Lickert* type answers (from 1, entirely disagree, to 4, entirely agree). We also used a *Familiar Self-concept Scale* (FSCS), with the following nine items, extracted from Piers-Harris Children Self-concept Scale (Piers, 1989): 14, 17, 25, 32, 35, 38, 59, 62, and 72. The answers are Thurston type. The alpha was 0.71. To evaluate the variable *parental authority*, we used two items, stating: 1. *My father deals with me in an authoritarian, understanding or indifferent manner*; 2. *My mother deals with me in an authoritarian, understanding or indifferent manner*. For the global sample, the alpha was 0.62.

### Hypothesis and Variables

*Ho 1*: There are no statistically significant differences between the means of adolescents violence in schools by the students group with high or low perceived parental support;

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*Ho 2:* There are no statistically significant differences between the means of violence in schools by groups of individuals coming from distinct socio-cultural family contexts — (un)employment, familiar cohesion (divorce-separation versus union), socio-cultural status (SCS), familiar self-concept, parental authority, and brothers' friendship;

*Ho 3:* There is no statistically significant difference of the results in violence in schools, due to some effect of interaction in the perceived parental support and variables of familiar context.

In all the situations presented taking the variable perceived parental support (PPS), students were divided in two groups: the group with low perceived parental support (PPS <) and the group with high perceived parental support (PPS >), whether the result in the perceived support was respectively under or above the average. A similar procedure was used in variable dichotomy: brothers' friendship (BF) and familiar self-concept (FSC). The variable parental authority (PA) was considered in three categories — understanding parents (UP), authoritarian parents (AP), and indifferent parents (IP) —, and the same procedure was applied to the socio-cultural status variable (low, middle, high).

## Results

In Table 1, we present the results on violence, based on the perceived parental support (PPS) and each one of the variables of familiar context: parents' unemployment (PU) versus employment (PE); divorce or separation (DIS) versus union (UNI); socio-cultural status (SCS); parental authority (PA); brothers' friendship (BF); and familiar self-concept (FSC).

Table 1. Variance in violence, according to parental support and familiar variables.

Violence	Support		Familiar variables	
	1	2	1	2
PPS	1 303.13	19.43	0.00	***
PEM	1 10.43	1.50	.221	ns
PPS x PEM	1 58.30	3.63	.043	*
PPS	1 307.59	20.75	.000	***
FC	1 12.56	.81	.369	ns
PPS x FC	1 59.89	3.85	.044	*
PPS	1 212.72	13.80	.000	***
SCS	2 76.74	4.98	.007	**
PPS x SCS	2 47.75	3.09	.046	*
PPS	1 168.38	10.50	.001	***
BF	1 79.01	4.93	.027	*
PPS x BF	1 72.51	4.52	.034	*
PPS	1 245.83	16.19	.000	***
FSC	1 414.74	27.32	.000	***
PPS x FSC	1 1.70	.11	.738	ns
PPS	1 140.08	9.18	.001	***
PA	2 182.90	11.99	.000	***
PPS x PA	2 11.28	.74	.477	ns

\* p<.05; \*\* p<.01; \*\*\* p<.001; ns = not significant

PPS (perceived parental support); PEM (parents' employment); FC (familiar cohesion); SCS (parents' socio-cultural status); BF (brothers' friendship); FSC (familiar self-concept); PA (parental authority).

With the following analysis, we intended to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the means of violence, based on perceived parental support and every one of the familiar variables. Another objective was to study whether the effect of the interaction of perceived parental support and every other familiar variables on the results presented in violence was or wasn't significant.

Considering the main effects of perceived parental support (Table 1), the analysis of variance shows the differences on violence between students with high perceived parental support and students with low perceived support, and the latter superiority on violence, is highly statistically significant (p<.001), whatever the familiar variable. Therefore — and as was expected — the results led to the exclusion of null hypothesis Ho 1.

The ANOVAs (Table 1) show that the main effect of familiar variables is statistically significant on socio-cultural level (p<.01), brothers' friendship (p<.05), familiar self-concept (p<.001), and parental authority (p<.001). This does not happen on (un)employment or familiar cohesion (no significant). These results allow the partial exclusion of null hypothesis Ho 2.

Besides the main effects, we verify — in four of the six situations considered — the variables interaction effect perceived parental support and familiar on violence, although hardly statistically significant as a decision criteria (p<.05). Specifically, we found the interaction effect of perceived parental support (PPS) and each one of the following familiar variables: (un)employment [(F(1, 645)=3.09; p<.05)], familiar cohesion [(F(1, 645)=3.85; p<.05)], socio-cultural status [(F(2,643)=3.09; p<.05)], and brothers' friendship [(F(1, 645)=4.52; p<.05)].

Therefore, considering the existence of several situations where the results variance on school violence is significantly affected by the interaction effect of perceived parental support and familiar variables, we decided to exclude null hypothesis Ho 3, as we had foreseen at first.

The analysis of the relationship between violence and parents' (un)employment — as well as the variations of this relation according to the variable perceived parental support — presented, as significant, the main effect of perceived support and the effect of the interaction of this variable with (un)employment. Nevertheless, this last variable was not, by itself, a cause for violence. The interaction effect of the variables perceived parental support and (un)employment, PPSxPEM, [(F(1, 645)=3.63; p<.05)] was due to the differentiation of results according to (un)employment in the group with low perceived support (t=3.3), but not in the group with high perceived support (no significant). The group of students with employed parents but low perceived support is more violent than the group with unemployed parents but high perceived support.

A similar mechanism to the previous one was seen in the interaction of the variables perceived parental support and familiar cohesion, PPSxFC, [(F(1, 645)=3.85; p<.05)]. There is result differentiation according to familiar cohesion in the group with low perceived parental support (t=1.98; p<.05), but it is not significant in the group with high perceived support. Furthermore, the group with non-divorced or non-separated parents, and simultaneously with low perceived support, is more violent than the group with divorced parents but with high perceived support.

Perceived parental support combined with socio-cultural status (PPSxSCS) has differentiated effects on schools violence [(F(2, 643)=3.09; p<.05)]. The effect of these two variables interaction is explained by the result differentiation according to socio-cultural status between the group with high perceived parental support, but the same does not happen in the low perceived support groups (no significant), and by the differentiation according to perceived support in groups of middle socio-cultural status (t=4.05; gl=356; p<.001) but not in the high or low SCS (no significant). In the group with middle socio-cultural status there is a statistical superiority of violence in the group with low perceived parental support when we compare it with the high perceived parental support group (t=4.05; gl=356; p<.001) — but the same does not happen in the middle or low SCS groups. On the other hand, there are statistical significant differences in the group with high perceived support only between middle and low SCS group, being the last one the violent group (t=4.27; gl=437; p<.001). In the low perceived support group there were no significant differences in the violence.

There were two other variables with significant interaction effect: perceived parental support and brothers' friendship, PPSxBF, [(F(1, 645)=4.52; p<.05)]. The differences according to friendship are between the high perceived support groups, but not in the low perceived support groups; the differences according to perceived support are between the higher level of friendship groups (t=3.36), but not between the lower level of friendship ones. There were no statistical significant differences between low perceived parental support groups and, simultaneously, with higher level of brothers' friendship and the groups with high perceived support and, simultaneously, lower level of brothers' friendship.

The relation analysis between violence and familiar self-concept — and of the variances of that relation according to perceived parental support variable — has shown, as significant, only the main effects of those variables. A similar mechanism has been noted within the parental authority and perceived support variables. Nevertheless, and in the last, further analysis shown statistical significant differences between the students group with authoritarian parents and the group with understanding ones — whether in the situation of high perceived support (t=3.9), or low perceived support (t=1.98) —, being less

aggressive the students with understanding parents. It was also statistical significant — considering the groups with understanding parents — the contrast between high perceived support versus low perceived support ( $t=3.2$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Finally, let us state that, although students with indifferent parents did not profess themselves as more violent than their schoolmates with authoritarian parents, both groups have shown statistical significant superior violence than their schoolmates with understanding parents — whether in a low support situation, whether and specially, in the high parental support one.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study are similar to the ones coming from previous investigations (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007; Malette, 2007; Nickerson et al., 2008; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007; Veiga, 2008).

The analysis conducted shows that the students with lower perceived parental support consider themselves to be significantly more violent than students with higher perceived support. On the other hand, there are several familiar mechanisms that influence violence of students in school context, such as the socio-cultural status, brothers' friendship, familiar self-concept and the kind of parental authority.

The situations of unemployment, divorce or separation seem not to have influenced, by themselves, adolescents' violence in schools. We can observe, nevertheless, that in families with low support, children of unemployed parents are more violent than the ones of employed parents. Nevertheless, students with unemployed parents and, simultaneously, with low perceived familiar support, are more violent than students with unemployed parents but with high perceived support. Therefore, in adolescents or students with unemployed parents and simultaneously low perceived support, the existence of a larger circle of support sources (such as teachers, psychologists...) may be a good way of mediating and declining the effects of parents' unemployment in their children.

In what the meaning of these results is concerned, we can advance with the idea that parents' intervention, faced as a process that may lead them to the progressive withdrawal of traditional discipline methods and, simultaneously, to learn competencies on practicing authority, and value exchanges of ideas and logical reasoning presentation.

In sum, the results have shown important relations between adolescents violence and their familiar context, and furthermore their variations with perceived parental support. The results are similar to the ones coming from previous investigations, revealing the relationship between adolescents engagement in school and a participative familiar education style (Branje, Lieshout, & Aken, 2005; Lambert & Cashwell, 2003; Malette, 2007), familiar cohesion (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Olweus, 1992; Veiga, 2001), perceived parental support (Malette, 2007; Veiga, 2007; Reynolds, 2003), regardless of divorce situation (Malette, 2007; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007), and the socio-cultural status (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Olweus, 1992; Veiga, 2001). As others studies underlined (Cowie & Jennifer, 2007; Malette, 2007; Martin & Marsh, 2008; Nickerson et al., 2008; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007; Veiga, 2008), the results suggest further investigations. Lastly, in posterior analysis, there will be of some interest to consider simultaneously several independent variables, using a higher range of differential variables and considering the human cognitive-social development perspective.

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