# Suicidal Ideation in Victims Bullying: The Role of Non-disclosure in the Family and School Contexts

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Abstract—The main objective of this study was to analyze the influence of adolescents' family and school contexts in the suicidal ideation of victims of peer bullying, considering the influence of the victim's non-disclosure of the victimization versus the victimized adolescent's communicating the situation. The results show that parental styles of rejection and indifference are positively related to victims' suicidal ideation and non-disclosure of bullying. Conversely, a positive school climate shows a negative relationship with victims' suicidal ideation and the disclosure of the bullying situation. The findings also indicate that non-disclosure mediates the relationship between the mother's parental style and suicidal ideation, whereas the school climate moderates the relationship between negative parenting styles and non-disclosure in adolescent bullying victims.

Index Terms—Victimization, non-disclosure, suicidal ideation, parental style, school climate

### I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, bullying has generated great social concern and interest in the scientific community [1, 2]. Bullying refers to violent behavior among peers characterized by its intentionality, persistence, and power imbalance [3].

Bullying behavior has been associated with significantly negative, and sometimes devasting, consequences at multiple levels, including substantial physical and psychological damage, such as emotional problems, stress, and anxiety or depression, among others [4, 5]. In the most severe cases, suicidal ideation is the consequence that arouses the most concern among professionals and educators and, in the worst case, the consummated act of suicide in the adolescent population. In fact, recent research data indicate that youths victimized by bullying have almost three times the risk of suicidal ideation [6] and are six times more likely to engage in suicidal behaviors than non-victims [7].

Although bullying by peers increases the probability of suicidal ideation in adolescents [8], not all victimized adolescents think about taking their own life. One explanation for these interindividual differences is that some factors are involved in this relationship, mediating or moderating the victimization-suicide association. The literature available so far suggests that positive relationships with parents and peers in adolescence promote a positive environment for adolescents' healthy mental development [9]. Some researchers have examined the interaction of familial and school factors in suicidal ideation among adolescents [10], but the gaps in the literature about the factors involved

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in suicide in bullying victims are still large. It is important to know under what circumstances parenting styles and school climate can affect the dynamics of suicidal ideation in victimization.

Research on familial factors in recent years has primarily shown the beneficial role of a positive family environment for children's development. Specifically, one such factor that has received considerable attention is parenting style. In the socialization of parents, two dimensions have traditionally been considered as a continuum to explain parenting styles: acceptance (characterized by parents' love and affection toward their child) and rejection (distinguished by parents' aversion or reprobation toward the child) [11].

Parental acceptance is associated with children's and adolescents increased psychological adjustment and is negatively related to emotional problems like psychological distress [12], depression, and anxiety [13]. Parental rejection is associated with higher psychological distress [14], as well as behavioral difficulties [15]. Thus, parents' positive affect toward their children is regarded as a protective factor against mental health disorders [16]. In contrast, children who experience their parents' rejection have a higher prevalence of emotional problems [17]. These emotional problems, in turn, have been associated with future suicide attempts [18], [19].

Among the key contexts to understand suicidal ideation in adolescent victims, the school environment is essential, given the large amount of time young people spend at school, and also because bullying occurs at school. It has been noted that school climate is an important aspect of youth development [20], referring to students' perceptions in their classroom, and encompassing dimensions such as their degree of involvement and motivation (engagement), student cohesion (affiliation), and the teacher-student relationship (teacher support) [21, 22]. Several studies suggest that school climate is associated with students' mental health [23].

Specifically, it has been observed that a positive school climate, which promotes feeling safe and connected at school, and peer and school community support, has a positive impact on children's and adolescents' mental health and well-being [24, 25]. Regarding suicidal ideation, the topic of interest in this study, reference [26] observed that youth with a tendency to suicidal thoughts or behaviors reported less supportive school climates. In this sense, reference [10] noted, on the one hand, that a positively perceived school climate buffered the associations of victimization with suicidal thoughts and behaviors and, on the other hand, that the association between victimization and suicidality was weaker when students perceived a healthy climate at school.

Until now, most studies have only focused on understanding the disclosure process surrounding bullying experiences, as the data show that many victims do not share their experience with others. Just one in ten students report having been repeatedly bullied at school [27], and between 20% and 33% of adolescent victims do not tell anyone [28]. This is because victims are often afraid of the bullies' retaliation [29] or that their experience will become known by unwanted people who will make them feel ashamed of their peer relationships [30]. Thus, the victims' disclosure of their bullying experience depends on their relational and social context [28].

In particular, how parents respond to disclosure and a high-quality parent-child relationship are associated with children's disclosure to family members [31]. Concerning bullying experience, reference [32] observed that children's decision to disclose the victimization situation was negatively affected by the parents' lack of interest or negative reactions to the issue. Similarly, reference [33] found that when victims perceive a negative family environment, there is less disclosure. The school can also influence an individual's decision to disclose. Thus, victimized students who perceive their classroom climate as supportive and protective are likely to trust their classmates to help stop the bullying, making it easier for them to tell adults about the victimization and encourage intervention [34]. In contrast, if victims perceive that their peers condone or tolerate bullying, they will be less likely to disclose their victim status [28]. Therefore, teachers, classmates, and the general school climate are an important part of students' social context. Students' perception of the teacher-transmitted classroom climate concerning actions during conflicts is also associated with their willingness to report bullying [35]. If the teacher does not express disapproval of bullying or take appropriate actions to intervene, this may convey a message to their students that bullying is, in fact, acceptable [36]. This situation could prevent disclosing cases of victimization and ending the situation and the associated psychological problems.

The current study addresses these social and scientific gaps, analyzing the influence of the two main socialization contexts in adolescence: the family—parental styles and the school—school climate—in the suicidal ideation of victims of peer bullying, taking into account the influence of non-disclosure of the victimization by the victimized adolescent. In particular, this general objective is divided into two more specific ones: (1) to examine the mediating role of the victim's non-disclosure (vs. disclosure) between the father's and mother's parental styles and the school climate concerning suicidal ideation; (2) to analyze the moderating role of school climate on the parenting styles of both parents concerning to non-disclosure in adolescents who are victims of peer bullying.

### II. METHOD

# A. Participants

Analyses of the present study are based on data from a representative sample of Spanish high school students who were recruited from 7 schools through random cluster sampling in the geographical areas of the Valencian Community, Aragon, and Andalusia. The total sample comprised 2977 adolescents (48.5% boys), whose ages ranged from 11 to 18 years (M = 14.1, SD = 1.42). Of the

total sample, 635 adolescents (21.3%) stated having been victims of bullying in the past year. In this subsample of 635 cases selected for the analyses of the present study, 36.9% were boys, and the mean age was 14 years (SD = 1.36).

### B. Procedure

Data for this research were collected as part of a larger study on violent behavior, school bullying, and suicidal ideation in adolescents in Spain, after gaining the approval of the corresponding research ethics committees of each participating university. A letter with a summary of the research project was sent to the participating schools as a first step. Subsequently, initial telephone contact with the school headmasters was established, followed by a briefing with all the teaching staff in each school, informing of the objectives and methodology of the study in a 2-hr presentation. In parallel, a letter describing the study was sent to the parents, requesting them to indicate in writing if they did not wish their child to participate (1% of parents used this option). Passive consent was received from the rest of the parents. The administration of the instruments was carried out by a group of trained and expert researchers in each region. Before data collection, students also attended a short briefing in which they provided written consent. On the dates scheduled with the teaching staff, participants voluntarily and anonymously filled out the scales in their respective schools during a regular class period of about 50 minutes.

## C. Instruments

Non-disclosure. This variable was measured by asking the victims, "If you've been bullied at school, have you told anyone?" The response options were: "I have not been bullied," "I have been bullied and I have told someone," or "I have been bullied but I have not told anyone." A first classification of the sample was established from the responses to select the cases that had been victimized. Then, the binary variable "disclosure" was constructed, distinguishing between students who had reported their victim status (0) and those who had not (1). Thus, the variable disclosure estimates the difference between the group that has not disclosed and the group that has communicated their victim status to someone.

Parental styles. The Child-Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire (PARQ/C; Rohner, 2005) in its Spanish adaptation by reference [37] consists of 29 items rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (almost never true) to 7 (almost always true) that measure four dimensions related to the behavior of both parents -separately— towards their children: fondness/affection ("Says good things about me"), hostility/aggression ("Hits me, even when I don't deserve it"), indifference/neglect ("Doesn't pay attention to me"), and Undifferentiated rejection ("When I misbehave, it makes me feel like I'm not loved"). For the structural equation model (SEM) analysis, the dimension of "affection" was reversed, so it could be called "non-affection," in order to delimit a global construct of "negative parental practices in education". Cronbach's alpha for the full scale in the case of the father was .95, and by dimension: affection = .92, hostility = .82, indifference = .82, undifferentiated rejection = .83. Cronbach's alpha for the full scale of the mother was .95, and for each dimension: affection = .92, hostility = .84, indifference = .81, undifferentiated rejection = .84.

School climate. For this variable, we used the relationship dimension of peer affiliation from the Classroom Environment Scale (CES; [38]) in its Spanish version by reference [39]. This version presents 20 items with true or false response options, which evaluate two subscales of classroom environment from the student's point of view: (1) Affiliation, or the degree of friendship and support among students ("Students in this class get to know each other really well'"); and (2) Teacher support, or the amount of help, trust, and friendship the teacher offers to students ("The teacher takes a personal interest in the students"). In the present study, internal consistency of the global scale measured through Cronbach's alpha was .82; for the subscales, .74 for affiliation, and .81 for teacher support.

Suicidal ideation. This variable was measured with the Paykel Suicide Scale [40] in its Spanish version by reference [41]. This questionnaire measures suicidal ideation, taking the frequency into account by assessing thoughts of death ("Have you felt that life is not worth living?"), suicidal ideation ("Have you thought about taking your own life even if you really weren't going to do it?"), and suicide attempts ("Have you tried to take your own life?") in the last year. The response system for each of the 5 items is dichotomous (Yes/No). Cronbach's alpha of the global scale in the present sample was .81.

## III. RESULTS

# A. Influence of Socialization Styles and school Climate on Suicidal Ideation

The adequacy of a complete measurement model for the proposed constructs was identified: factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, and covariances between latent variables in the measurement model are shown in Table III. Factor loadings are high and significant for all the items (p < 0.001): above .75 in Suicidal Ideation, .55 in School Climate, .75 in Father's Style and .80 in Mother's Style. The reliability coefficient is greater than 0.80 for the four latent variables.

The global measurement model showed an optimal fit ( $\chi 2$  = 134.49, df = 94, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .05). Modification rates showed a correlation of errors between Item 4 of suicidal ideation ("Have you reached the point where you really considered taking your own life or made plans about how you would do it?"), and Item 5 ("Have you ever tried to take your own life?"). All the subsequent models integrated this justifiable correlation considering the relationship between the two items' formulation.

In a first structural model calculated, in which the effects for sex and age were controlled ( $\chi 2 = 155.54$ , df = 103, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .04), we observed that both the father's negative parenting ( $\beta$  = .16, p < .01) and the mother's negative parenting ( $\beta$  = .19, p < .001) significantly influence the victim's suicidal ideation. Also, a negative school climate had a significant impact on adolescents' suicidal ideation ( $\beta$  = -.27, p < .001). In summary, this structural model indicated that victims' suicidal ideation is directly and positively associated with parenting styles linked to rejection and indifference, both by

the father and the mother, and it is negatively associated with the school climate.

# B. Mediating effects of Non-Disclosure

The variable non-disclosure (concealing the bullying situation) was added to the previous structural model as a mediating variable (Figure 2). This model had an optimal fit:  $\chi$ 2 = 167.62, df = 116, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .04. Figure 1 shows the significant relationship between the three variables with the mediator non-disclosure. The direction of these relationships is as follows: on the one hand, both the father's and mother's negative socialization styles were positively associated with the adolescent's non-disclosure of their situation as a victim. On the other hand, a positive school climate was negatively related to non-disclosure, showing that this climate favors victimized students communicating their victimization situation. The model also estimated a statistically significant and positive coefficient between the mediating variable non-disclosure and suicidal ideation, with a value of .31 (p < .001), indicating that the victim's non-disclosure is associated with greater suicidal ideation.

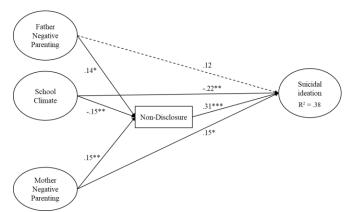


Fig. 1. The mediation model of father's and mother's socialization styles on suicidal ideation, with the variable Non-Disclosure as mediator.

Note: \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001.

The introduction of the mediating variable non-disclosure reduced the direct influence of the three variables on suicidal ideation, although with different results. On the one hand, the significance of the direct relationship between the father's negative style and suicidal ideation was canceled ( $\beta=.12,\,p<.073$ ), and on the other hand, the mother's style ( $\beta=.15,\,p<.05$ ) and, above all, the school climate ( $\beta=-.22,\,p<.001$ ), again showed significant direct relationships with suicidal ideation.

The potential indirect effect channeled through the mediating variable non-disclosure was contrasted by bootstrapping using 1000 resampling's. The estimated indirect effect of the father's negative socialization style on suicidal ideation was  $\beta=.02$ , and the 95% confidence interval [-.03, .06] included the value 0, indicating that the effect could be null. Regarding the mother's negative socialization style, the estimated indirect effect was  $\beta=.06$ , 95% CI [.02, .12], accounting for 25.41% of the total effect. The indirect effect of school climate was estimated at  $\beta=-.05$ , CI [-.09, .00]. These results indicated that the relationship between the mother's negative practices and suicidal ideation

was partially mediated by the variable non-disclosure. However, non-disclosure was not a significant mediating variable between the father's socialization and the bullying victim's suicidal ideation, nor did it have a significant mediating effect on school climate.

## C. Moderating Effects of Perceived School Climate

To test the moderating effect of school climate on socialization styles, we followed the recommended steps for moderated mediation models (Maslowsky et al., 2015), using LMS (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000) analysis. To contrast the moderation hypotheses, different models were built to observe the effect of the interactions considered individually. First, we contrasted the interaction of the variable school climate on paternal socialization in its relationship with non-disclosure. The baseline model consisted of a model in which the interaction of father's negative parenting and school climate was also included as a predictor, but the relationship was restricted to zero. In this baseline model, the father's negative parenting had a nonsignificant relationship with non-disclosure ( $\beta = .19$  [OR = 1.21], p = .15), whereas school climate had a negative and significant relationship (β = -.28, OR = .76, p < .05), and the mother's negative parenting had a positive and significant relationship ( $(\beta = .27,$ OR = 1.31, p < .05). The interaction model was identical to the reference model, except that the interaction was not set to 0. In this model, the father's negative parenting had a nonsignificant coefficient with non-disclosure. In contrast, the relationship between the mother's negative parenting (β = .25, OR = 1.29) and school climate ( $\beta$  = -.30, OR = .75) remained significant (p < .05). The relationship between the interaction component and non-disclosure was negative and significant ( $\beta = -.43$ , p < .05). The log-likelihood chi-square difference test was significant, indicating that the interaction model was significantly better than the baseline model,  $\chi 2$  (1) = 7.55, p < .01. All these results indicated the existence of an interaction between the father's negative parenting and school climate.

# IV. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to analyze the influence of adolescents' family and social context on the suicidal ideation of victims of peer bullying, taking into account the influence of the victim's non-disclosure of the victimization situation versus the victimized adolescent communicating the situation. Concerning the family context, parental socialization styles were taken into account, and regarding adolescents' social context, the school climate was considered.

The results of this study showed a positive relationship between parental styles of rejection and indifference and suicidal ideation in victims of bullying. Conversely, a positive school climate had a negative association with suicidal ideation in victims of bullying. The findings also concluded that non-disclosure of bullying has an important effect on school climate and suicidal ideation.

Our findings suggested that negative parenting styles would increase the likelihood of non-disclosure of bullying. This result is along the lines of the few studies that have used non-disclosure when indicating that young people are

reluctant to inform adults in their environment about their victim status unless they trust them [42]. Similarly, other studies have indicated that the emotional support provided by adolescents' trusted people is an important factor that encourages them to disclose their experience of bullying [33]. In this sense, trusting their parents is closely linked to positive parenting styles [43], which could explain why fewer victims of bullying disclose their situation when they perceive negative family environments.

Our results also suggested that the positive school climate of peer affiliation and teacher support would reduce victims' non-disclosure; in other words, it would promote victims' communication about their bullying situation. These findings are in line with those of [44], as they noted that victims of bullying were more likely to disclose their situation to adults in their school environment if they trusted them and considered them capable of handling the disclosure appropriately. Another study related to school climate indicated that students who perceived that their teachers did not tolerate bullying in the classroom were more likely to talk about bullying than students who perceived their teachers' attitudes as ambivalent or tolerant towards bullying [28]. This same study also found that perceived peer support for victims of bullying was related to informing adults about victimization. This support perceived by the victims can promote the feeling of safety that leads them to communicate their situation.

We expected that non-disclosure in the face of a situation of victimization would mediate the relationship between negative parenting styles and suicidal ideation. This expectation was partially supported when contrasting the existence of significant indirect effects of the mother's style on suicidal ideation through the variable non-disclosure. In relation to these findings, especially the latter, previous studies have observed that mothers and fathers play different roles in young people's development [45]. Thus, talking about their concerns with their mother may seem more natural and comforting than discussing them with their father. This is possibly due to the fact that listening to problems is traditionally considered part of the female gender role [46]. Likewise, although the available studies have not analyzed the variable non-disclosure in the relationship between parenting styles and suicidal ideation in the context of victimization, some authors point out that victims of bullying remain silent when they perceive the family environment as negative [33]. However, ending the victims' silence can be essential to prevent the psychological problems associated with bullying situations [47]), such as, in its most extreme manifestation, the case of suicidal ideation analyzed in this

Regarding school climate, it was observed that a positive school environment moderated the effect of the father's style on non-disclosure. In fact, the results indicated that as the school climate improved, the father's negative style lost its effect on non-disclosure until it was canceled. Although comparing this result with previous literature is difficult given the novelty of this study, current studies show that the support that bullying victims receive from their classmates is related to disclosing the situation of victimization to adults in the family and the school environment [28]. This study also found that students were more likely to talk about

victimization when their teachers were intolerant of bullying versus when they were ambivalent or tolerant toward bullying. In line with social support, evidence suggests that perceived social support by bullying victims can buffer the relationship between bullying experiences and mental health difficulties [48].

This study has several limitations that should be considered for future research. A first limitation is based on the cross-sectional nature of the data, which makes it impossible to establish causal relationships between the variables analyzed. A longitudinal study in which measurements are collected at different times would clarify the observed relationships. Secondly, we must bear in mind that, although the questionnaires were administered anonymously, the adolescents self-administered the instruments, and this could generate response biases that could affect the validity and generalization of the data. Finally, it should be noted that the results of this study are limited to the adolescent stage of 11 to 18 years, so they are not generalizable to individuals of other ages or other educational levels (early childhood education, primary education, and higher education), or even to school environments from other cultures.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Estefanía Estévez and Elizabeth Cañas conducted the research; Francisco Estévez-García analyzed the data; all authors wrote the paper and approved the final version.

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