

## Aggressive and non-aggressive rejected students: Where are the differences?<sup>1 2</sup>

Gonzalo Musitu  
Feliciano Veiga  
Juan Herrero  
Marisol Lila

### Resumo

Esta investigação pretendeu explorar os diferentes perfis de alunos rejeitados agressivos e não-agressivos de entre 1069 adolescentes entre os 12 e os 16 anos de idade. Reflectindo acerca dos factores que poderão contribuir para a pertença a uma ou outra categoria, distinguimos quatro conjuntos de factores: pessoais, familiares, sociais e de funcionamento escolar. Os factores pessoais incluem diversas dimensões do self (académica, familiar e social), depressão e stress percebido; os familiares englobam a comunicação familiar (pai-pai e pai-criança) e apoio familiar (de pais e de irmãos); os sociais incluem relações de apoio e acontecimentos de vida; os escolares abrangem as atitudes face à escola, o estatuto sócio-métrico na sala de aula, e as percepções do professor sobre a adaptação psicossocial e escolar do aluno. Os resultados das análises MANOVA, ANOVA mostraram que os alunos agressivos e rejeitados diferiam dos alunos não-agressivos rejeitados e do grupo de controlo na medida em que possuem níveis mais pobres de funcionamento pessoal, familiar, social e escolar. Além disso, os resultados também mostraram o grau moderado de adaptação dos alunos não-agressivos rejeitados em relação ao grupo de controlo.

*Palavras-chave:* alunos agressivos; alunos rejeitados; funcionamento familiar; funcionamento escolar

### Abstract

The purpose of the present investigation was to explore the different profiles of aggressive and non-aggressive rejected students in 1069 adolescents from 12 to 16 years old. In thinking on the factors that may contribute to belonging to one category or the other, we differentiated between four sets of factors: personal, family, social and school functioning. Personal factors include several dimensions of the self (academic, family, and social), depression and perceived stress; family comprises family communication (parent-parent and parent-child) and family support (parental support and sibling support); social factors include support relationships and life events; school includes the attitudes towards school, sociometric status in the classroom, and the teacher's perceptions of psychosocial/school adjustment of the student. MANOVA, ANOVA analyses results showed that aggressive and rejected students differed from other non-aggressive-rejected students and the control group in the fact that they have poorer levels of personal, family, social, and school functioning. Also, the results have also shown the moderate level of adjustment of the non-aggressive/rejected students in relation to the group control.

*Keywords:* aggressive students; rejected students; family functioning; school functioning

### Introduction

A sizeable minority of children at school are rejected by peers (10-15%). These rejected adolescents lack positive qualities to balance their aggressive behavior (Newcomb, Bukowski, and Pattee, 1993; Veiga, 1996) which may lead to higher levels

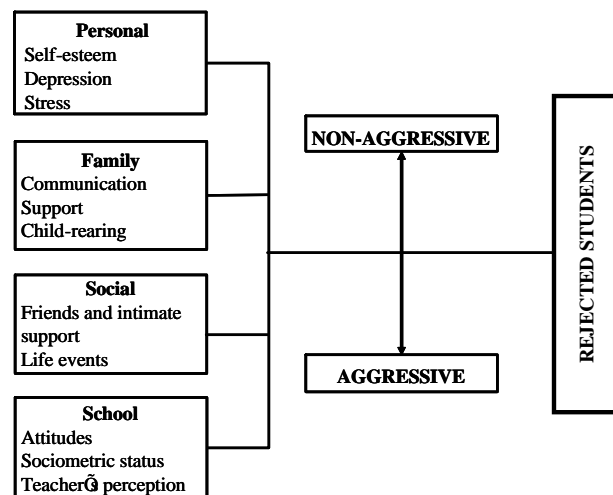
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of conflict with peers and teachers, higher rates of disruptive behavior in the classroom or a tendency to break social rules, to mention only a few. These rejected and aggressive students have been linked to poorer psychosocial adjustment while compared to their non-rejected counterparts. This circumstance is especially important since, as Coie, Dodge and Coppotelli (1982) have pointed out, rejected children will probably not become ‘popular’ children over time. Furthermore, they tend to stay rejected or change to ‘ignored’ (Cilessen, Bukowski, and Haselager, 2000) thus remaining a risk group. These two circumstances – stability and poor psychosocial adjustment – may explain the considerable amount of research that has been directed towards the study of rejected students since the 80’s.

Although aggressiveness has been frequently linked to rejection, it is not always synonymous of rejection and to some extent it is probable that non-aggressive rejected adolescents can be found in most classrooms. These non-aggressive students have a different profile than aggressive students: aggressive rejected students have shown a clear tendency of disruptive and other violent behavioral patterns, whereas non-aggressive rejected students have shown a lack of social assertivity, and lower levels of social interaction (Rubin, LeMare, and Lollis, 1990; Veiga, 2001). This special case of rejected students has been comparatively unstudied probably due to the absence of aggressive or antisocial behaviour in this group.



## Method

### *Sample*

Participants in this study were 1069 adolescents from 12 to 16 years old that were attending secondary school at the time of the study. Four schools were selected in the Valencia urban area (Spain) based on their availability. Permission from parents and school staff were obtained prior to conducting the study. Gender was distributed approximately equal in the sample (47% male, 53% female). 84% of the sample was living with both mother and father, while the rest were living only with the mother (12%), father (2%) family (1%) or other (1%).

### *Measures*

Questionnaires evaluated four sets of variables (personal, family, social, and school):

*Personal.* Three measures of self-esteem (academic, social, and family) and two measures of psychological distress (depression and perceived stress) were used.

*Family.* Parental and sibling support, parent communication and parent-child communication were evaluated.

*Social.* Undesirable life events, and friend and intimate support were measured.

*School.* Attitudes toward school, aggressive behaviour at school, sociometric status in the classroom, and the teacher's perceptions of student's adjustment were chosen as reflective of the student functioning at school.

### *Analysis*

Descriptive and inferential analyses (chi-squared, MANOVA, ANOVA) were conducted to test differences in the variables included in the study for the three groups: rejected aggressive (N=43) and non-aggressive students (N=127), and a control group of non-rejected/non-aggressive students (N=673). Rejected students were identified through a sociogram. Raw scores on an 'aggressiveness and violence at school' scale were standardized within classroom. Scores greater than +1 SD above the mean were labeled as 'aggressive'.

## **Results**

### **Distribution of rejected/aggressive students by gender and age**

Prior to the comparisons of the groups, several analyses were conducted to obtain a better understanding of the distribution of rejected and aggressive students among the sample. There were more aggressive males than females ( $\chi^2=44.70$ ; d.f.=1;  $p=.000$ ), but the percentage of rejected males and females was not statistically different ( $\chi^2=3.28$ ; d.f.=1;  $p=.070$ ). The percentage of rejected students ( $\chi^2=3.31$ ; d.f.=1;  $p=.069$ ) and aggressive students ( $\chi^2=1.77$ ; d.f.=1;  $p=.183$ ) were equally distributed in two age groups (11-13, 14-16 years old). None of the schools included in this study showed a different significant proportion of aggressive ( $\chi^2=3.28$ ; d.f.=3;  $p=.070$ ) or rejected ( $\chi^2=3.28$ ; d.f.=3;  $p=.070$ ) students. Finally, for the groups used in further analyses, there were statistically less females than males in the rejected/aggressive group and more females in the control group ( $\chi^2=17.29$ ; d.f.=2;  $p=.000$ ).

### **MANOVA and ANOVA**

A MANOVA was conducted across all personal, family, social, and school variables to examine group differences among rejected/aggressive, rejected/non-aggressive, and a control group of non-rejected/non-aggressive students. Next, a post-hoc ANOVA (using Bonferroni's correction) was conducted for each individual variable statistically significant in the MANOVA. Due to the existence of sharply unequal cell sizes, robust estimators against the violation of homogeneity of variances (Brown-Forsythe, Welch) were used for the calculation of the F in the ANOVA.

As for the personal functioning (Wilk's Lambda=.859;  $p<.000$ ) (see Table I), rejected students showed lower levels on academic and family self-esteem as well as

higher levels on depression when compared to the control group. Also, non-aggressive rejected students showed the lowest levels of social self-esteem meanwhile aggressive students expressed the lowest levels of academic self-esteem and higher levels of perceived stress.

Variable	Rejected		
	Control Group	Non-Aggressive	Aggressive
Social self-esteem	23.93a	22.92b	23.95a
Academic self-esteem	21.21a	19.24b	15.69c
Family self-esteem	26.20a	25.51a	23.67b
Perceived stress	38.28a	38.93a	41.30b
Depression	48.15a	50.51b	50.90b

a>b>c p<.05

*Table I. Summary of univariate analyses of rejection/aggression subgroup differences in personal functioning*

Overall, in respect to family functioning (Wilk's Lambda=.898;  $p<.000$ ) (see Table II), non-aggressive/rejected and control group behaved similarly in the variables examined. Aggressive/rejected students consistently showed a pattern of lower levels of family support and positive communication, as well as higher levels of negative communication. Thus, this latter group showed the highest levels of negative communication not only with their parents but among parents themselves.

Variable	Rejected		
	Control Group	Non-Aggressive	Aggressive
Parent support	60.80a	57.70b	53.30c
Parent-child comm.			
Parents (inductive)	16.42b	16.12b	15.02a
Parents (offensive)	6.63b	7.37	8.30a
Taboo	6.61b	6.35b	7.72a
Irritated child	4.64b	4.75	5.55b
Parent-parent comm.			
Parent's aggression (physical)	4.16b	4.21b	4.86a
Parent's aggression (verbal)	6.28b	6.81	7.65a

a>b>c p<.05

*Table II. Summary of univariate analyses of rejection/aggression subgroup differences in family functioning*

As seen in Table III (Wilk's Lambda=.954;  $p<.000$ ), control and non-aggressive groups scored similarly in the social variables. The aggressive group showed the highest levels of undesirable life events but also the highest levels of intimate support.

Variable	Rejected		
	Control Group	Non-Aggressive	Aggressive
Life Events	5.67a	6.74b	8.95c
Intimate support	17.01b	18.54b	31.23a
Friend's support (n.s)	54.20	51.56	50.51

a>b>c p<.05

*Table III. Summary of univariate analyses of rejection/aggression subgroup differences in social functioning*

Finally, most of the variables that differentiate the three groups can be found in Table IV (Wilk's Lambda=.948;  $p<.000$ ). Thus, teachers perceived the control group as more intelligent, with more chances to succeed at school and expressed a better relationship with them.

Variable	Rejected		
	Control Group	Non-Aggressive	Aggressive
Teacher's perceptions			
Success	6.79a	4.86b	4.00c
Intelligence	6.64a	5.36b	5.62c
Relationship	7.40a	6.62b	6.14c
Attitude towards school			
Transgression	6.44b	6.81b	9.16a
Respect. Authority	16.49a	16.65a	13.83b
Perception of injustice	8.14b	8.66b	10.37a
Indifference toward studies	4.28c	4.77b	6.18a

a>b>c  $p<.05$

*Table IV. Summary of univariate analyses of rejection/aggression subgroup differences in school functioning*

Regarding attitudes towards school, the aggressive group scored significantly higher than any other group. They were more transgressors, expressed lower levels of respect toward authority, perceived more injustice at school, and were more indifferent towards their studies. On the other hand, there were more similarities between control and non-aggressive groups: similar levels of transgression, respect toward authority, and perception of injustice. Control group showed less indifference toward their studies than the non-aggressive group.

## Conclusions

The results of this investigation highlight the distinctive nature of the aggressive versus non-aggressive rejected children. Aggressive and rejected students differed from other rejected students in a systematic and theory-consistent manner. This kind of student experienced poorer levels of personal, family, social, and school functioning. On the other hand, the results have also shown the moderate level of adjustment of the non-aggressive/rejected students. Whereas these students seem to have a relatively good family and social functioning, their school functioning presents several deficits. It is worthy to note that these students perceived themselves as lacking social competence and their teachers rated them as less intelligent than control students. Since no major family and social differences were found among control and non-aggressive groups, it is probable that a poor school performance and/or a low personal functioning could serve as explanations for this second type of rejection (Musitu y García, 2004, Veiga, 1996).

Although rejected students have been traditionally linked to delinquency, aggressiveness or even victimization, an approach examining the role of violence and aggressiveness in rejection is needed. Non-aggressive students also appear to represent an important target group for empirical inquiry and psychosocial intervention. However, because their 'non-aggressive' nature, their visibility may go unnoticed by teachers and professionals, since they are distinct to more typically aggressive-rejected children.

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