



# COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COEXISTENCE PROBLEMS AMONG INSTITUTIONALIZED ELDERLY PEOPLE VERSUS SENIOR CLASSROOM

## ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DE LOS PROBLEMAS DE CONVIVENCIA ENTRE PERSONAS MAYORES INSTITUCIONALIZADAS VERSUS AULA DE MAYORES

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**Isabel M<sup>a</sup> García-Munuera\***

*Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Speech Therapy,  
University of Murcia, Spain.  
im.garciamunuera@um.es*

**Inmaculada Méndez**

*Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Speech Therapy,  
University of Murcia, Spain.  
inmamendez@um.es*

**Cecilia Ruiz-Esteban**

*Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Speech Therapy,  
University of Murcia, Spain.  
cruiz@um.es*

**Juan Pedro Martínez-Ramón**

*Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Speech Therapy,  
University of Murcia, Spain.  
juanpedromartinezramon@um.es*

\* Corresponding author: Inmaculada Méndez, Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology. Faculty of Psychology. Tel.: +34868887751. 30100 Campus of Espinardo, Murcia. University of Murcia. Murcia, Spain. Email: inmamendez@um.es

## Abstract

**Theoretical Framework:** Traditionally, bullying among peers has been confined to the school environment; however, it is increasingly being shown that this phenomenon also occurs in other contexts. In this sense, several investigations have focused their attention on the phenomenon of bullying among older people. The aim of this study was to compare bullying problems among users belonging to institutionalized centers with students in a classroom for the elderly. **Method:** Participants were  $N = 80$  elderly people ( $M = 73.23$  years;  $SD = 11.18$ ) with 63.7% being female. A purposive sampling was carried out using a cross-sectional design. The Bullying Questionnaire adapted to Spanish was administered together with an ad hoc questionnaire to collect the sociodemographic characteristics in both groups. **Results:** The study has shown that bullying episodes also occur in older people, and are mainly verbal and relational harassment. Likewise, differences were found in the role of aggressor in bullying between the group belonging to institutionalized centers compared to the senior classroom. It was found that age was associated with the role of aggressor; however, no differences were found with respect to gender. **Conclusions:** The conclusions revolve around the need to create bullying prevention and intervention programs among the elderly in community settings to improve their quality of life and promote active aging.

**Key-words:** bullying, cyberbullying, institutionalized center, senior classroom, aging.

## Resumen

**Marco teórico:** Tradicionalmente, el acoso entre iguales se ha circunscrito al ámbito escolar; sin embargo, cada vez está más demostrado que este fenómeno también se produce en otros contextos. En este sentido, diversas investigaciones han centrado su atención en el fenómeno del bullying entre personas mayores. El objetivo de este estudio fue comparar los problemas de bullying entre usuarios pertenecientes a centros institucionalizados con estudiantes de un aula de mayores. **Método:** Los participantes fueron  $N = 80$  personas mayores ( $M = 73.23$  años;  $DT = 11.18$ ) siendo el 63.7% mujeres. Se llevó a cabo un muestreo de tipo intencional y un diseño transversal. Se administró el Cuestionario de Bullying adaptado al español junto con un cuestionario ad hoc para recoger las características sociodemográficas en ambos grupos. **Resultados:** El estudio ha puesto de manifiesto que los episodios de bullying también ocurren en personas mayores, siendo sobre todo acoso de tipo verbal y relacional. Del mismo modo se encontraron diferencias en el rol de agresor en bullying entre el grupo perteneciente a los centros institucionalizados en comparación con el aula de mayores. Se encontró que la edad se asociaba con el rol de agresor, sin embargo, no se encontraron diferencias con respecto al género. **Conclusiones:** Las conclusiones giran en torno a la necesidad de crear programas de prevención e intervención del bullying entre los mayores en entornos comunitarios para mejorar su calidad de vida y promover un envejecimiento activo.

**Palabras clave:** acoso escolar, ciberacoso, centro institucionalizado, aula de mayores. envejecimiento.

## Introduction

Institutionalized centers for the elderly have become one of the most demanded alternatives (Huenchuan et al., 2021; Molero & Pérez-Fuentes, 2011; Ruiz-Esteban et al., 2023). This has occurred due to family and social changes such as the incorporation of women into the labor market, the reduced number of family members, their geographic dispersion, and the slow incorporation of the role of male caregivers (Gallo et al., 2013; Pérez Díaz et al., 2022). According to a report by the Institute for the Elderly and Social Services (Institute for Senior Citizens and Social Services, 2009), in Spain 1.2% of people over 65 years of age live in institutionalized centers, increasing to 1.5% between 75 and 84 years of age, and 4.6% above that age, with twice as many women as men, in line with the European trend.

On the other hand, in Spain there are 4.1 places per 100 inhabitants for nursing homes (Pérez Díaz et al., 2022); although the data may vary from year to year, the information allows understand the situation and can help to design strategies. The fact of moving to these centers involves adaptation to new schedules, routines, and rules, as well as the shared use of services and space (Benson & Beckmeyer, 2012), which can become a stressor with negative results (Heisler et al., 2004, Lawton, 1975). In these coexistence environments, social conflicts arise that can deteriorate the quality of life of the elderly and the residential climate, largely due to the apathy and need for attention of institutionalized elderly (Carbonell-Cutillas & García-Longoria, 2012). When these conflicts between residents do not occur in isolation and are sustained over time, they can have serious consequences (Bonifas, 2016; Goodridge et al., 2017; Jeffries et al., 2018; von Humboldt, 2022).

Although the bullying phenomenon has been more studied in previous stages among the youngest (John et al., 2023; Martínez-Ramón et al., 2020; Méndez et al., 2019; Mula-Falcón & Cruz González, 2023; Orozco et al., 2022, Ruiz-Esteban et al., 2020; Thorgal et al., 2023), another context of interaction that is becoming more and more common are the classrooms for the elderly (Brearily, 2023; Weiwei et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). These are educational programs related to different areas of knowledge, mainly confined to universities, and aimed at promoting interpersonal relationships and autonomy among this group

(Moreno-Crespo, 2015; García-Sevilla et al., 2016).

In both contexts described, bullying or harassment among peers arises when a series of aggressive behaviors occurs repeatedly (Thornberg et al., 2020), with the intent to harm and in a situation of power imbalance (Olweus, 2013). There are mainly three types of bullying in older people (Bonifas, 2016): verbal bullying, which refers to the use of derogatory words such as insults or threats; relational or antisocial bullying, which includes behaviors that attempt to limit social connections; and physical bullying, which includes behaviors that involve physical contact with the victim or his or her belongings. More recently, a fourth type has appeared, cyberbullying or cyber harassment, which consists of the use of technologies and means of communication such as e-mail, social networks, or cell phones to intimidate psychologically (Jeffries et al., 2018; Ruiz-Esteban et al., 2023).

It appears that these negative behaviors among older adults occur mainly in the form of relational bullying, without physical contact, with the intention of preventing the formation of peer relationships with the most frequent aggressions being verbal and social, not physical (VandeNest, 2016). Following this idea, in a set of interviews with 45 professionals caring for the elderly in institutionalized centers in the western United States of America, it was found that all but one of the participants had witnessed bullying situations in their facilities, with verbal bullying being the most frequent, followed by social bullying (Andresen & Buchanan, 2017).

In terms of prevalence, approximately 20% of elderly people have experienced bullying in assisted living and independent retirement facilities (Bonifas, 2016), and in other studies it has been as high as 50% (Benson & Beckmeyer, 2012). The prevalence may be higher due to feelings of shame, fear, or inability to recognize this type of behavior (Sepe, 2015). The consequences of bullying range from lower self-esteem, feelings of rejection, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, reduced ability to perform activities of daily living, stress, sleep, and eating problems (Bonifas & Frankel, 2012; Goodridge, 2017; Rodriguez & Aliev, 2021).

When analyzing the sociodemographic variable gender, men were subjected to physical ha-

rassment and women, on the other hand, suffered more verbal and social aggression (Pengpid & Peltzer, 2013). Likewise, men were more involved in both the role of victim and aggressor and were more involved in direct forms of social aggression such as insults, while women were involved in indirect aggression such as spreading rumors (VandeNest, 2016). Other studies found no differences between women and men, so further research is needed (Tripathi & Agarwal, 2019). In terms of age, it has been shown that at older ages, greater involvement in bullying roles appears (Du & Chen, 2021; Ramalingam et al., 2019).

The aim of this study was to analyze the coexistence problems that occur among elderly people interacting in two different community settings, the elderly classroom, and institutionalized centers. The specific objectives were: (objective 1) to examine the prevalence of different bullying behaviors in elderly people according to the aggressor and victim profiles; (objective 2) to compare the presence of bullying between institutionalized centers and senior classrooms according to the

aggressor and victim profiles; and (objective 3) to study the relationship between the aggressor and victim profiles and the sociodemographic variables age and gender.

Taking into account the stated objectives, we mention the hypotheses of the study below: (Hypothesis 1) we will find the existence of the various manifestations of bullying in older people; (Hypothesis 2) we will find a greater involvement in bullying in people from institutionalized centers compared to senior classrooms; and (hypothesis 3) we will find that men and older people are more actively involved in bullying roles.

## Method

### Participants

A purposive sampling was carried out using a cross-sectional design. Inclusion criteria were established as follows: (criterion 1) belonging to

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic variables

Variables	Subvariables	Percentage / Time (Month/ Year)
Sex	Male	36.3
	Female	63.7
Marital status	Couple/Married	38.8
	Separated/Divorced	8.8
	Widow	40
	Single	12.5
Origin	Spain	93.8
	Outside Spain	6.3
Education level	No studies	30
	Primary Education	18.8
	Secondary Education	25
	Higher Education	26.3
Visits to relatives	Every day	41.3
	At least once a week	37.5
	At least once a month	11.3
	Less than once a month	10
Time in the center	Institutionalized	1 month- 20 years
	Senior Classroom	1 month

an institutionalized center or being enrolled in the elderly classroom program; (criterion 2) without cognitive impairment so that they could correctly complete the questionnaires; and (criterion 3) having spent at least one month residing in the center or attending the senior classroom. The exclusion criteria were: (criterion 1) not having the informed consent of the participants to take part in the study; and (criterion 2) poorly completed or partially completed instruments. The participants in the study were  $N = 80$  subjects, 40 belonging to institutionalized centers in a region of southeastern Spain and 40 participants from a senior citizens' classroom at a university in that region, with ages ranging from 54 to 93 years ( $M = 73.23$  years;  $SD = 11.18$ ). Regarding the sex of the participants, 36.3% were men and 63.7% were women. Finally, the time spent in the institutionalized center ranged from one month to 20 years and in the senior classroom at least one month. Table 1 shows the rest of the sociodemographic characteristics.

## Instruments

First, the Bullying Questionnaire was administered (Bonifas, 2014; Trompeter et al., 2019). For our study, a translation into Spanish was carried out first by the members of the research, being reviewed by a native English speaker. This instrument consists of 22 items, 15 referring to the victim and 7 to the aggressor, and collects information on different types of conflicts that can occur in community settings, including verbal, relational, physical and cyber, with a Likert-type scale of 5 options where: 0 is "Never"; 1 is "Every two or three months"; 2 is "Several times a month"; 3 is "Several times a week" and 4 is "Several times a day". The questionnaire application time is approximately 10-15 minutes, although it may vary depending on the characteristics of each subject. In our study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.71, being 0.73 on the original validated scale. Example of item for victim: "Someone has repeatedly made fun of you". Example of item for aggressor: "You have made fun of another classmate".

Secondly, an *ad hoc* questionnaire was applied to collect the sociodemographic variables: sex (dichotomous nominal variable: male or female), origin (dichotomous nominal variable: born in Spain or born outside Spain), marital status (nominal variable: married or with a partner, separated or divorced, widowed or single), level of studies (or-

dinal variable: no studies, primary studies, medium studies or higher studies), time in the center (ordinal variable: month/ year), and frequency of visits (ordinal variable: every day, once a week, once a month or less than once a month). This last variable provides an idea of social support. The administration time of this questionnaire ranges between 5-7 minutes.

## Procedure

First, it was necessary to obtain approval from the Ethics Committee of the University (ID: 2443/2019). Next, a previous meeting was held with the management team in the selected centers for institutionalized persons, as well as in the senior classroom of a university in southeastern Spain to inform them of the purpose of the study, the characteristics of the instrument to be administered, and to request their informed consent. Secondly, the participants were selected considering the inclusion criteria, with participation in the present study being completely voluntary. The completion of the questionnaires was carried out ensuring the confidentiality of the data and anonymity, following the guidelines of the Helsinki Protocol. The questionnaires were administered individually, by means of a personal interview. After a brief explanation of the topics to be addressed, the items were administered. Data collection was carried out from August 2019 until March 2020, when it was interrupted following the situation caused by COVID-19.

## Data analysis

The analysis of descriptive data consisted of the analysis of frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. The normality of the distributions was checked with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic. The distributions did not follow a normal law, so non-parametric tests were applied to study the significance of the results: Mann Whitney U test for independent samples and Spearman's correlation coefficient. Statistical analysis of the data was carried out using the SPSS program, version 28.0.

## Results

### *Prevalence of bullying according to the profile of aggressor and victim*

The frequency analysis of items to determine the percentage of subjects who had experienced each of the bullying or cyberbullying situations measured in the instrument is found in Table 2.

Regarding the items on the behaviors of older perpetrators, 7.5% indicated having teased another partner every two or three months, 2.5% several times a week and another 2.5% several times a day. As for making fun, 5% did so every two or three weeks, another 5% several times a

week and 7.5% several times a day. In relation to spreading rumors, 10% indicated that they did it every two or three months, 2.5% several times a week and 1.3% several times a day. Finally, in the items "has hit someone", "has bullied through the Internet", "has stolen from someone" and "has prevented someone from accessing resources or activities at the center" all participants indicated that they had never carried out this type of bullying behavior.

Regarding the victim, 7.5% had been ignored by their peers every two or three months, 1.3% several times a month, 1.3% several times a week and 7.5% several times a day, while the remaining 82.5% had never been ignored. As for having spread rumors about their life, 12.5% had

**Table 2.** Percentages in the Bullying Questionnaire adapted to the Spanish population

Items	0	1	2	3	4
1. Feeling that someone is ignoring you	82.5	7.5	1.3	1.3	7.5
2. Feeling that they have disseminated unproven information	85.0	12.5	1.3	-	1.3
3. Laughing maliciously	88.8	7.5	-	-	3.8
4. Do not stand nearby, avoid	90.0	2.5	2.5	1.3	3.8
5. Leaving out of a group	96.3	-	2.5	1.3	-
6. Expressing negative opinions	80.0	13.8	2.5	1.3	2.5
7. To have been controlled	87.5	7.5	2.5	1.3	1.3
8. Receiving racial comments	96.3	3.8	-	-	-
9. Receive comments on sexual orientation	97.5	1.3	-	1.3	-
10. To have been coerced or threatened	9.5	3.8	1.3	-	-
11. To have been the object of theft	87.5	12.5	-	-	-
12. To have been assaulted	97.5	2.5	-	-	-
13. To have been injured	98.8	-	1.3	-	-
14. Being cruel with their belongings or pets	96.3	3.8	-	-	-
15. Being bullied through social networks	100	-	-	-	-
16. Having physically assaulted	100	-	-	-	-
17. Having bullied through social networks	100	-	-	-	-
18. Mocking someone	87.5	7.5	-	2.5	2.5
19. Ignoring someone	82.5	5.0	-	5.0	7.5
20. Spreading rumors	83.8	10.0	2.5	2.5	1.3
21. Having stolen	100	-	-	-	-
22. Have restricted services to someone	100	-	-	-	-

Note. 0: Never; 1: Every two to three weeks; 2: Several times a month; 3: Several times a week; 4: Several times a day

**Table 3.** Results of the Mann-Whitney U test for the roles of aggressor and victim depending on the context

	Victim	Aggressor
MWU	628.000	437.000
WW	1448.000	1257.000
Z	-1.871	-4.257
p	-0.61	0.000*

MWU—value of Mann-Whitney U test; WW—value of Wilcoxon W; Z—Z value of test; p—level of statistical significance of test; \* marks statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ).

been the subject of rumors every two or three months, 1.3% several months a month and 1.3% several times a day, the rest indicated that they had never felt that information had been spread. Regarding malicious laughter, 7.5% indicated that they had experienced it every two or three months and 3.8% several times a day. Focusing on exclusion from group activities, 2.5% indicated that they had been excluded several times a month by their peers, 1.3% several times a week, and the remaining 96% had not felt excluded. On the other hand, 13.8% indicated having been subjected to criticism or negative opinions by their peers every two or three months, 2.5% several times a month, 1.3% several times a week and 2.5% several times a day. Regarding the item assessing control over decision making, 7.5% were constrained in their decision making every two or three months, 2.5% had experienced it several times a month and 1.3% several times a week and several times a day. In relation to having suffered racial or derogatory comments, 3.8% indicated that they had been subjected to this type of comment every two or three months while the remaining 96.3% had never experienced racial comments from their peers. Regarding comments about their sexual orientation, 1.3% indicated having experienced them every two or three months, another 1.3% several times a week, and 97.5% reported never having experienced them. As for having received

threats from their peers, 3.8% indicated having received them every two or three months, 1.3% several times a month and the rest indicated that they never received threats. A total of 12.5% indicated that they were robbed every two or three months, while the remaining 87.5% had never been victims of theft. In addition, 1.3% reported having been bullied several times a month and the rest reported that they had not suffered this type of harassment. Finally, in the item referring to bullying suffered through social networks, no one reported having experienced this type of aggression.

### Comparison of bullying between institutionalized centers and senior classrooms according to the aggressor or victim profile

To determine the differences between the two groups, Mann Whitney U test for independent samples was performed, which determined the existence of significant median differences in these groups in the aggression variable (see in Table 3). The median obtained in the group of institutionalized elderly was higher ( $Md=49.58$ ,  $n=40$ ) than the median of the senior classroom for both variables ( $Md=31.43$ ,  $n=40$ ). However, in

**Table 4.** Spearman's linear correlation coefficients between the variables age, victim, and aggressor

	Age	Victim	Aggressor
Age	1		
Victim	0.20	1	
Aggressor	0.45**	0.42**	1

Note.  $N = 80$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 5.** Results of the Mann-Whitney U test for the roles of aggressor and victim based on gender

	Victim	Aggressor
MWU	681.000	720.500
WW	116.000	1155.500
Z	-0.662	-0.232
p	0.508	0.817

the victim variable, no significant differences were found depending on whether they were residents or students in the senior classroom.

### **Aggressor and victim profiles with sociodemographic variables age and gender**

Significant positive correlations were obtained between the variables age and aggressor profile with low effect sizes ( $r_s = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ); therefore, the older the age, the greater the probability of aggressive behavior (Table 4).

With respect to gender differences, Mann Whitney U test was performed for independent samples, and no significant differences were found in the median of the aggression and victim variables when comparing women and men ( $p > 0.05$ ) (see in table 5).

## **Discussion**

About objective 1, this study makes it clear that episodes of bullying among peers also occur in the elderly. These are not isolated conflicts but occur repeatedly and with the intention of harming another peer in line with what was previously stated (Bonifas, 2016, Olweus, 2013). Sometimes, such behaviors are difficult to identify, and verbal and relational bullying is much more common than physical bullying, in line with previous studies which found that bullying among older adults was not usually in the form of physical violence, but was of a relational nature such as rumors, teasing or taunting (Bonifas, 2016; VandeNest, 2016). No evidence has been found of cyberbullying in the elderly although it is likely to become a future problem due to the rise of new technologies and access to them; even so, existing findings show that these two forms of bullying are not as common

among older people as verbal or relational bullying (Bonifas, 2016). In this sense, we can affirm that we have verified the proposed hypothesis 1 (Hypothesis 1) since we have evidenced the existence of the various manifestations of bullying in older people.

Following objective 2, significant differences were found between institutionalized centers and the elderly classroom in relation to the aggressor profile, which indicates that in institutionalized centers a greater number of aggressions between peers occur than in the elderly classroom. In this sense, these bullying behaviors tend to occur more frequently in places where people live together longer, share a greater number of resources and there is a greater age difference (Bonifas, 2016); thus, in institutionalized centers the resources and services to be shared, as well as the variability between generations, is greater than in the senior classroom. We can affirm that we have verified hypothesis 2 since we have found a greater involvement in bullying in people from institutionalized centers compared to senior classrooms.

In relation to objective 3, no statistically significant differences were found between women and men, as would be expected from previous studies (VandeNest, 2016). In contrast, previous studies also found no differences according to gender (Tripathi & Agarwal, 2019), so once again it is necessary to continue studying this variable to shed light on the matter. On the other hand, significant correlations were found between age and aggressive behaviors, suggesting that the older the age, the greater the probability of engaging in this type of behavior. Therefore, age plays a relevant role in bullying dynamics (Du & Chen, 2021; Ramalingam et al., 2019). The data obtained allow us to partially accept hypothesis 3 since we have not found differences based on gender, but it has been shown that older people are more actively involved in bullying roles.



Regarding the applicability of the study, the data found make it possible to visualize the social reality of bullying in older adults in line with other studies (Jeffries et al., 2018), which is a key factor prior to the development of effective prevention and intervention measures in community contexts (Carbonell-Cutillas & García-Longoria, 2012). The relevance of psychoeducation for both professionals and older adults is evident so that they know how to identify this type of aggressive behavior and provide professionals with effective strategies to intervene and curb these behaviors (Bonifas, 2016).

Regarding the limitations of the study, firstly, the small number of participants and the difficulty of access after the COVID-19 pandemic should be noted. Another limitation to take into account is that this was a cross-sectional study limited to one region of Spain, so caution must be taken in the generalization of the data.

As for future lines of research, it would be interesting to administer the instruments in different regions, carry out comparative studies, increase the number of participants and include the situation of professionals to know the strategies they must act in situations of harassment (Andresen & Buchanan, 2017). In another line, it would be interesting to include the role of public and private institutions as an independent variable in the explanation of coexistence in old age (Funk et al., 2019), with the final application of managing equality policies (Huenchuan et al., 2021). It will also be interesting to include variables related to motivation (Arroyo & Zeledón, 2014), other socio-demographic factors (Acuña-Muñoz, 2021), other variables that may be influencing coexistence (Lange et al., 2019), such as coping strategies, resilience, or stress factors, or even to include the influence of the pandemic of COVID-19 (in burnout, fear, etc.) (Silva et al., 2023) as a mediator in the coexistence.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study show that the bullying phenomenon is a reality that cannot be reduced to the younger population, as it has been proven that it also manifests itself in the elderly. There is a higher incidence of bullying in institutionalized centers. The main manifestations of bullying in the elderly are social and verbal behaviors in comparison to physical bullying.

These results contribute to the development of a body of knowledge of this phenomenon at these ages.

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