

## **The Compassion Dimension in Bullying in High School Students**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *The study focused on the analysis of the relationships between the dimensions of compassion: Self-Compassion, Fear of compassion and the Functions of Self-Criticism, and the 5 roles adopted in bullying: Bully, Assistant, Victim, Defender and Outsider.*

**Objectives:** *The objective of the study was to measure the quality of predictors of the dimensions of compassion for the adoption of the 5 roles of bullying.*

**Methods:** *The sample consisted of 189 students aged between 16 and 19 years old, enrolled in the 11th and 12th grades in technical colleges, arts and crafts schools and theoretical high schools. The participants completed a set of questionnaires comprising: a section for socio-demographic data, Bullying Participant Behaviors Questionnaire (BPBQ), Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), Fears of Compassion Scale (FCS), The Functions of Self-Criticizing/ Attacking Scale (FCCS). Linear regression analyzes were performed.*

**Results:** *The results show that some dimensions of Self-Compassion, Fear of compassion and the Persecution Function of Self-Criticism are predictors for the roles adopted in bullying: Mindfulness is a significant predictor for the role of Victim; Self-Kindness and Isolation for the role of Bully; Over-identification for the Assistant role; Self-Kindness for the Outsider role; Self-Judgment and Over-identification for the Defender role. The Fear of compassion for self is a strong predictor for the roles of Outsider and Defender; the Fear of compassion from others correlates positively with the vulnerability to the Bully and the Assistant roles; and the combined variables of Fear of compassion have a statistically significant contribution to the Victim roles. The Self-Persecution Function of Self-Criticism is also a strong predictor for the role of Victim, but weak predictor for the roles of Bully and Outsider.*

**Conclusions:** *As adolescence is a period of identity search by accepting the group of peers, developing compassion for self and repositioning towards self-compassion, compassion for others and from others could support adolescents to avoid taking on roles in bullying situations. Investigation and reduction of self-criticism could be included in anti-bullying intervention programs, both individually and at group level for this age category.*

**Keywords:** *self-compassion, self-criticism, fear, shame, bully, assistant, victim, defender, outsider*

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## I. Introduction

*Compassion.* In common parlance, compassion has a component of pity, doubled by the desire to alleviate the other's suffering (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020; Meriam Webster Dictionary, 2020a; Stevenson & Waite, 2011). Compassion is defined as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it" and its antonym is cruelty (Gilbert, 2005; The Compassionate Mind Foundation; Neff, 2003a). Its evolutionary basis lies in the internal system of analysis and response to the threat, which has a social side, in the internal capacity of an individual to obtain a positive emotional response and support from his peers, from the strategies of our ancestors to create alliances and protect offspring and communities etc. (Gilbert, 2005). It differs from the concept of pity (Romanian Academy, 2009; Larousse, 2001), by the component of wanting and undertaking efforts to alleviate suffering. Empathy has a narrower conceptual area – it refers to an individual's ability to relate to another person's pain as if he or she were experiencing the pain itself, according to Meriam Webster Dictionary (2020b), having two dimensions: understanding (cognitive) and sharing (affective) the other's state (Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). If empathy refers to a wide range of emotional states, compassion boils down to suffering. Both concepts are related to the theory of mind, because they presuppose the ability to attribute mental states and cognitions to others (Gilbert, 2005), and this search for social acceptance is innate in man (Gilbert & Irons, 2009, p. 196). Self-evaluation comes from and is based on external evaluation, being a feature both innate and cultivated. Its cultivation can be positive, generating a self-supporting attitude, or negative, leading to self-criticism (op. cit., 2009).

*Self-compassion.* The original term *tsewa* did not differentiate between self and hetero compassion, given the Buddhist belief that the individual is united with all others through humanity (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Self-compassion encompasses 3 elements: a) *self-kindness* – being benevolent and understanding with oneself in moments of suffering or failure, versus being self-critical and harsh; b) sharing humanity (*common humanity*) or perceiving one's own experience as part of the experience of the human condition, not as something individual, which isolates and shames the individual; and c) *mindful acceptance* – awareness and acceptance of thoughts and feelings of pain, rather than over-identification with them (Neff, 2003a, p 2). Sharing humanity, rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, but with arguments

in evolutionary psychology, refers to self-forgiveness, for the deeply human side, so accepting that you are imperfect by your very nature (Buckingham et al., 2016; Gilbert & Irons, 2009).

*Shame, self-criticism.* The appearance of shame is related to early experiences in relationships with caregivers and correlates with depressive rumination (Cheung et al., 2004). Internal shame, a negative self-experience that is automatically contextualized and socially manifested, affects social competition (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2003a). In adolescents, shame functions as "an internal warning system that the individual has failed to create positive feelings in others, resulting in negative self-esteem" (Gilbert & Irons, 2009, p. 198), in the context in which the evaluation of the group of co-genders for adolescents is stronger. Self-criticism is "a process of inner shame" (op. cit., 2009, p. 202), based on the experience of the self as defective, inadequate, undesirable and non-desired. In the face of shame, the individual has behaviors ranging from submissiveness and self-criticism (internalization) to anger and domination (outsourcing) (ibidem, 2009).

*Bullying.* A type of violent behavior in which a student or group of students repeatedly and intentionally harms other students, who are less physically or mentally strong, sometimes for long periods of time, always involving an imbalance of power (Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Tani et al., 2003). Bullying can be physical, verbal, or indirectly relational (Knauf, Eschenbeck, & Hock, 2018). In Romania, 84% of school-age children say they have witnessed threats such as bullying, 80% have witnessed humiliation, and 78% have repeatedly witnessed a child being pushed and hit lightly by other children; 58% of children admitted that typical bullying scenes occur frequently at the level of the class they belong to, and 32.4% that they witness this type of aggression in the online environment (Grădinaru & Stănculeanu, 2013). The forms of bullying include: physical bullying – hitting, pushing, spitting, beating, stealing or destroying someone's property; verbal – nicknaming, mocking, humiliating, threatening, making racist, sexist comments or harassing someone; social – the exclusion of someone from a group, the gossip or spread of rumors about someone, the presentation of another in a way that puts him in a humiliating situation and his isolation. This includes ill-treatment of people of another culture, religion, race, ethnicity, as well as racist jokes, or humiliating public comments about one's disability or physique (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009; U'Mofe Gordon, 2018), socio-sexual – isolation,

marginalization or ill-treatment of those of the opposite sex or sexual orientation, jokes about someone belonging to a sexual minority or sexist jokes, unwanted touching, gross sexual comments (Pepler & Craig, 2016). Bullying is not specific to socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and the differences between urban and rural areas are not significant (Canales Urrea et al., 2018). The most common bullying behaviors reported by both aggressors and victims in adolescence are verbal aggression (nicknames, teasing) and victimization by exclusion (Atik & Güneri, 2013). The size order of the school and the classroom, as well as the degree of supervision, the school climate and the adoption of clear anti-bullying policies influence the degree of spread and intensity of the phenomenon (Tani et al., 2003; U'Mofe Gordon, 2018).

*Roles in bullying.* Some research exclusively recognizes the roles of aggressors/ bullies, victims, or witnesses (Tani et al., 2003; Schaefer et al., 2005; Turns & Sibley, 2018); others have added the role of victim-aggressor, but do not differentiate between types of witnesses, treating them as “uninvolved persons/ individuals” (Coelho & Sousa, 2018). Bullying, as a phenomenon, affects not only the aggressors and the victims protagonists, but also those around them, who, depending on various emotional, situational or personality factors, become witnesses involved. Thus, there are also witnesses involved – victims’ defenders, some who try to prevent bullying, ally with the victim; or supporters of the aggressor – on the contrary, endorse the aggressor and become supporters of bullying (Salmivalli, 2010, apud Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019; Pouwels et al., 2018; Knauf, Eschenbeck, & Hock, 2018). Students who do not conform to gender role prescriptions (boys who are more sensitive, more emotional) and those who belong to sexual minorities, who belong to ethnic minorities or who have a form of disability are more often victims of aggression, and the social acceptance of their aggression is higher (Canales Urrea et al., 2018). Children who are bullied have low scores on the extraversion scales and high scores on neuroticism (Tani et al., 2003) and give explanations about their role related to personal defects – they are different (34%) or weaker (approximately 36.5%) than the others (Canales Urrea et al., 2018). Like bullies, victims also appear to have low empathy scores (Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). Victims have the highest scores of neuroticism compared to any other category, and higher levels of emotional instability and conscientiousness than those involved in bullying as passive witnesses (Tani et al., 2003). Adolescent bullies

define social skills differently, in a narrow sense: thus, if an act of aggression or victimization has the expected result, it proves social competence (Coelho & Sousa, 2018). Children oriented towards the role of aggressor tend to have high values of hostility, impulsive behavior, lack of cooperation and increased sensitivity in social situations (Tani et al., 2003). There are three aspects that maintain bullying behaviors: aggressors receive material rewards (money, food from other children), social rewards (strengthening of their group position, the feeling of power), and/or a form of special treatment – its supporters hide the facts before school authority (Canales Urrea et al., 2018) and have a general tendency towards aggression (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying aggression correlates negatively both with the cognitive component of empathy, and with the affective one, and positively with *callous-unemotional traits*, which designate a temperamental dimension characterized by low empathy, interpersonal callousness, restricted affect and a lack of concern for performance (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). Moral disengagement can lead to stopping before the actual action to support the victim, so to remaining a passive/ disengaged witness (Bandura et al., 1996). Witnesses who adopt disengagement strategies rely on others to take responsibility, but also have procedural knowledge and a sense of self-efficacy, while those who do not adopt such strategies end up taking responsibility and then taking action (Knauf, Eschenbeck, & Hock, 2018). Those who tend to intervene on behalf of victims have higher levels of altruism and cognitive and affective empathy, higher levels of self-esteem and less need for external approval, rely on internal value systems and are less likely to guide their behavior according to external assessments (Zych, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2019). Passive (uninvolved) witnesses have lower levels of both agreeableness and extraversion than victims and victims’ supporters and than aggressors’ assistants (Tani et al., 2003).

*Risk factors and predictors in bullying.* High scores at the external locus of control, highly permissive parenting styles, older age, and being male increase the risk of taking on a bully role. The probability of becoming a victim is influenced by high scores at the external locus of control, at the loneliness measurement scale and by a lower degree of acceptance/ adaptation. Predictors for the role of victim-aggressor were high scores of loneliness and psychological autonomy, a low degree of strictness and parental supervision and of academic achievement (Atik & Güneri, 2013). Moral disengagement is a strong predictor of bullying

behaviors; physical discipline in childhood and low levels of supervision have a strong inverse correlation with levels of moral disengagement in adolescents (Campaert, Nocentini, & Menesini, 2018; Turns & Sibley, 2018). Therefore, different research indicate extreme parenting styles to influence the adopting of bullying roles in children and adolescents.

*The effects of bullying.* In addition to low self-esteem, studies also indicate difficulties in making friends and low chances of success in social and professional life, increased risk of suicide and vulnerability to depression among women, difficulties in romantic relationships with men, and vulnerability, increased victimization at work (Canales Urrea et al., 2018). There is also a mention of decreased psychological well-being, dysfunctions or psychological disorders on the medium and long term, increased use of alcohol and substances in adolescents (Coelho & Sousa, 2018). Those who play a predominant role as aggressors in bullying situations have an increased risk of becoming aggressors in couple relationships, and victims of bullying are more likely to become victims in relationships (Zych, Viejo et al., 2019). Bullying has the effect, especially in adolescence, of an increase in vulnerability for the further development of psychopathology, as well as a significant decrease in well-being. (U'Mofe Gordon, 2018).

## **II. Objectives**

The general objective of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the different dimensions of compassion (Self-Compassion, Fear of compassion and Self-Criticism) are significant predictors for the 5 possible roles of bullying participants (Bully, Assistant, Victim, Defender, Outsider). Firstly, the present paper aimed to highlight the extent to which Self-Compassion is a statistically significant predictor for bullying roles. Secondly, the study aimed to highlight the extent to which Fears of compassion are statistically significant predictors for bullying roles. Thirdly, the study aimed to capture the extent to which the Functions of Self-Criticism are statistically significant predictors for bullying roles.

### ***Hypotheses:***

1. Self-Compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of Bully.
2. Fear of compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the Bully role.
3. It is assumed that the Functions of Self-Criticism are statistically significant predictors for the role of Bully.

4. Self-Compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of the aggressor's Assistant.

5. Fear of compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of the aggressor's Assistant.

6. It is assumed that the Functions of Self-Criticism are statistically significant predictors for the role of the aggressor's Assistant.

7. Self-Compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of Victim.

8. Fear of compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of Victim.

9. The Functions of Self-Criticism are assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of Victim.

10. Self-Compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the victim's Defender role.

11. Fear of compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the victim's Defender role.

12. The Functions of Self-Criticism are assumed to be statistically significant predictors for the victim's Defender role.

13. Self-Compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the role of the Outsider.

14. Fear of compassion is assumed to be a statistically significant predictor for the Outsider role.

15. The Functions of Self-Criticism are assumed to be statistically significant predictors for the role of the Outsider.

## **III. Methods**

### ***Participants***

188 students from the 11th and 12th grades, both from Bucharest and from other cities in the country, answered the online questionnaire package. A student under the age of 18 left the research after the parental agreement section. The ages of the respondents vary between 16 and 19 years, as follows: 10 respondent students are 16 years old, 66 are 17 years old, 91 are 18 years old and 21 of them turned 19 at the date of completing the study. Of these, 79 (41%) who answered the questionnaire are enrolled in the 12th grade, and 109 (58%) are enrolled in the 11th grade. 115 girls (61.2%) and 73 (38.8%) boys answered the online questionnaire set. Only 2 students among the respondents are enrolled in a private school, the

remaining 186 are coming from public education institutions. Respondents cover a range of educational profiles, as follows: 46 (24.5%), come from classes with a technical/ technological profile; 40 (21.3%) of classes with philological profile; 33 (17.6%) come from classes with a natural sciences profile; 21 (11.2%) of classes with social sciences profile; 16 (8.5%) – classes with sports profile; 15 (8%) of classes with mathematics-informatics profile; 12 (6.4%) – economic profile; the remaining 2.5%, – artistic and environmental protection profiles.

### **Procedure**

This study is non-experimental and based on psychological investigation methods, using self-administered questionnaires. The processing of the collected data was performed using linear regression analysis, for which a cross-sectional design was used. The questionnaires were administered in online format, through the Google Forms platform, being mainstreamed on discussion groups, social media, through teachers, on the online groups represented by the target class communities. The data were collected between April 1 2020 – May 17 2020.

### **Tools and variables**

Participants were given a questionnaire with 5 sections, requesting data: on demographic details (age, gender, type of school, educational profile of the class), roles in bullying and dimensions of compassion (respectively Self-Compassion, Fear of compassion and the Functions of Self-Criticism).

The **Self-Compassion dimension** was measured using the SCS – Self-Compassion Scale, developed by Kristin Neff in 2003. SCS subscales: Self-Kindness, Self-Judgement, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness, Over-identification.  $\alpha = .88$  for Self-Kindness;  $.88$  for Self-Judgment;  $.80$  for Common Humanity;  $.85$  for Isolation;  $.85$  for the Mindfulness subscale and  $.88$  for the Over-identification subscale.

The questionnaire has 26 items with 5 Likert scale answer options, from 1 = Almost never to 5 = Almost always. The scale measures 6 factors, distributed in 3 opposing pairs: Self-Kindness vs. Self-Judgment, Common Humanity vs. Isolation, Mindfulness vs. Over-identification. In the present study the values of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is:  $\alpha = .84$  for the Self-Compassion Scale, and for the sub-scales:  $\alpha = .83$  for Self-Kindness;  $\alpha = .83$  for Self-Judgment;  $\alpha = .77$  for Common Humanity;  $\alpha = .87$  for Isolation;  $\alpha = .82$  for Mindfulness;  $\alpha = .85$  for Over-identification.

The **Fear of Compassion dimension** was investigated with the Fears of Compassion Scale (FCS). The questionnaire includes the subscales for assessing the Fear of compassion for others; Fear of compassion from others; and Fear of compassion for self.  $\alpha = .85$  for Fear of compassion for others;  $\alpha = .87$  for Fear of compassion from others;  $\alpha = .85$  for the scale Fear of compassion for self (Gilbert et al., 2011).

The questionnaire has 37 items with 5 Likert-type answer points, which investigates the extent to which a read statement fits the respondents, respectively: 0 = Don't agree at all, 1 = To a small extent, 2 = Moderate, 3 = To a large extent, 5 = Completely agree. The value of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the present study are: with  $\alpha = .84$  for Fear of compassion for others;  $\alpha = .90$  for Fear of compassion from others;  $\alpha = .93$  for scale Fear of compassion for self;  $.95$  for the entire instrument. The translation of the scales was done by the back-translation method, then the English retroversions were done independently and transmitted for compliance to the Compassionate Mind Foundation.

The **Functions of Self-Criticism dimension** was investigated by the Functions of Self-Criticizing/Attacking Scale (FSCS), with  $\alpha = .92$  for both subscales (Self-Correction, respectively Self-Persecution) (Gilbert, 2005; Halamová et al., 2018). The questionnaire includes 21 items to complete the statement "I criticize and get angry with myself:" (example of the item: "...to stop me being lazy"), each with 5 variants of answer on the Likert scale, respectively: 0 = Not at all like me, 1 = A little bit like me, 2 = Moderately like me, 3 = Quite a bit like me, 4 = Extremely like me. The scale measures 2 factors: SC = Self-Correction, and SP = Self-Persecution. In the present study the values of the coefficient  $\alpha$  were  $.87$  for the Self-Correction Function,  $.98$  for the Self-Persecution Function and  $.91$  for the whole scale. The scale translation was done by the back-translation method, the English retroversions being performed independently and transmitted for compliance to the Compassionate Mind Foundation.

**Bullying roles** were investigated using the Bullying Participant Behaviors Questionnaire (BPBQ) (Kilpatrick Demaray et al., 2016). The scale has 50 items with 5 Likert answer points (respectively: 1 = Never, 2 = Once a month, 3 = Twice or more times a month, 4 = Once a week, 5 = Twice or several times a week) and investigates the 5 roles in bullying: Bully, Assistant, Victim, Defender, and Outsider. Cronbach's alpha coefficient values in the present study:  $\alpha = .83$  for the Bully subscale;  $\alpha = .75$  subscale

Assistant;  $\alpha = .89$  for the Victim subscale;  $\alpha = .92$  for the Defender subscale;  $\alpha = .85$  for Outsider. The translation used was made in 2019 by Guțu, Ion, Mihalache & Tudor. The questionnaire was filled in by bilingual speakers in both the original and the translated version. During these stages, no discrepancy was identified in the items, as a result no further translation was required.

**Independent variables/ predictor:** Self-Compassion (dimensions: Self-Judgment, Self-Kindness, Isolation, Common Humanity, Over-identification, Mindfulness), Fear of compassion (dimensions: Fear of compassion from others, Fear of compassion for others, Fear of compassion for self), the

Functions of Self-Criticism (dimensions: the Function of Self-Correction, the Function of Self-Persecution).

**Dependent variables/ criteria:** the role of Bully, the role of Assistant, the role of Victim, the role of Defender, the role of Outsider.

**Research design**

The data were processed by the SPSS program var. 24. First, the preliminary analysis of the data was performed, in the form of aspects of descriptive statistics.

Subsequently, the inferential statistical analysis was performed, through the statistical procedure of linear regressions, for each of the investigated hypotheses.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Descriptive Statistics								
	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Std. Error	Std. Error
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Bully	188	1	3	1.49	.499	1.381	.177	1.797	.353
Assistant	188	1	3	1.32	.409	2.167	.177	5.909	.353
Victim	188	1	5	1.57	.729	1.932	.177	4.145	.353
Defender	188	1	5	2.20	1.000	1.113	.177	.602	.353
Outsider	188	1	5	1.56	.633	2.010	.177	6.687	.353
Self-Judgement	188	1	5	3.05	.999	-.010	.177	-.474	.353
Self-Kindness	188	1	5	3.33	1.028	-.429	.177	-.474	.353
Isolation	188	1	5	3.26	1.169	-.193	.177	-1.034	.353
Common Humanity	188	1	5	3.55	1.299	-.175	.177	-1.236	.353
Mindfulness	188	1	5	3.38	.999	-.315	.177	-.381	.353
Over-identification	188	1	5	3.24	1.130	-.138	.177	-.971	.353
Fear of compassion for others	188	0	4	1.71	.815	-.019	.177	-.599	.353
Fear of compassion from others	188	0	4	1.33	.859	.277	.177	-.429	.353
Fear of compassion for self	188	0	4	1.23	.912	.701	.177	-.053	.353
Self-Correction Function	188	1	5	2.90	.820	-.221	.177	.084	.353
Self-Persecution Function	188	1	5	2.35	.995	.468	.177	-.373	.353
Valid N (listwise)	188								

**IV. Results**

The results of this study are presented in the form of enumeration and analysis of the outcomes obtained for each of the research hypotheses.

*The dimensions of compassion as predictors for the role of aggressor (Bully)*

In order to establish whether the Self-Compassion dimension is a predictor for the Bully role, respectively for testing the first hypothesis, we resorted to linear regression analysis. The regression results highlighted the statistically significant contribution of

the variables Self-Kindness ( $B = -.207$ ) and Isolation ( $B = .194$ ), with  $F = 9.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $r^2 = .09$  to the model of prediction presented.

Linear regression analysis showed the statistically significant contribution of the variable Fear of compassion from others ( $B = .123$ ), with  $f = 15.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $r^2 = .076$  to the presented prediction model.

In order to establish whether the Functions of Self-Criticism constitute a statistically significant predictor for the Bully role, respectively for testing the third hypothesis, a linear regression analysis was performed, the results of which highlighted the

statistically significant contribution of the Self-Persecution variable ( $B = .131$ ), with  $F = 8.43$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r^2 = .043$  in the presented prediction model.

Table 2. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with hypothesis 1

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	18.880	1.204		15.676	.000
	Self-Kindness	-.236	.069	-.243	-3.421	.001
2	(Constant)	15.858	1.676		9.465	.000
	Self-Kindness	-.207	.069	-.213	-2.999	.003
	Isolation	.194	.076	.182	2.555	.011

Table 3. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with hypothesis 2

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12.818	.647		19.825	.000
	Fear of compassion from others	.123	.032	.276	3.912	.000

Table 4. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with hypothesis 3

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12.490	.917		13.618	.000
	Self-Persecution	.131	.045	.208	2.903	.004

*The dimensions of compassion as predictors for the role of the aggressor's Assistant*

The results of the linear regression highlighted the statistically significant contribution of the Over-identification variable ( $B = .132$ ), with  $F = .40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r^2 = 0.21$  for the role of Assistant.

Table 5. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with hypothesis 4

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	11.516	.900		12.802	.000
	Over-identification	.132	.066	.145	2.003	.047

Statistical analysis also showed that the Fear of compassion from others ( $B = .059$ ), with  $F = 4.97$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $r^2 = .02$  is a significant predictor for this Assistant role.

Table 6. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with hypothesis 5

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12.201	.544		22.444	.000
	Fear of compassion from others	.059	.026	.161	2.228	.027

The results of the linear regression performed did not highlight the significant contribution of any of the variables Function of Self-Correction and Function of Self-Persecution for the manifestation of the role of Assistant, to the presented prediction model.

*The dimensions of compassion as predictors for the role of Victim*

The results of the applied statistical procedures highlighted the statistically significant contribution of the variable Mindfulness ( $B = -.322$ ), with  $f = 8.54$ ,  $p$  less than 0.01,  $r^2 = .22$  for the Victim role.

Table 7. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with hypothesis 7

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	14.701	2.808		5.236	.000
	Self-Kindness	-.184	.134	-.130	-1.371	.172
	Self-Judgment	.170	.143	.117	1.192	.235
	Common Humanity	.040	.154	.022	.258	.797
	Isolation	.263	.166	.169	1.587	.114
	Mindfulness	-.322	.154	-.176	-2.092	.038
	Over-identification	.144	.174	.089	.831	.407

Also, the regression results highlighted the statistically significant contribution of the combined variables Fear of compassion for others ( $B = .087$ ), Fear of compassion from others ( $B = .147$ ), and Fear of compassion for self ( $B = .056$ ), with  $F = 11, 2$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $r^2 = .15$  to the presented prediction model.

Table 8. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 8

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	10.664	1.148		9.288	.000
	Fear of compassion for others	.087	.091	.097	.950	.344
	Fear of compassion from others	.147	.092	.225	1.588	.114
	Fear of compassion for self	.056	.063	.105	.886	.377
2	(Constant)	15.707	.531		29.557	.000

The Self-Persecution Function is a strong predictor for the vulnerability to the role of Victim (B = .356), with F = 10.7, p < .01, r<sup>2</sup> = .10, in conformity with the presented prediction model.

Table 9. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 9

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta		
1 (Constant)	13.165	1.875		7.022	.000
Self-Persecution Function	.356	.079	.389	4.505	.000
2 (Constant)	15.707	.531		29.557	.000

*The dimensions of compassion as predictors for the Defender's role*

Regarding the role of Defender, the results of the analysis with applied linear regressions indicated the statistically significant contribution of the combined variables Self-Judgment (B = .638) and Over-identification (B = -.459), with F = 4.6, p < .05, r<sup>2</sup> = .056, and statistically significant contribution of the variable Fear of compassion for self (B = .108), with F = 4.1, p < .005, r<sup>2</sup> = .022, to the presented prediction model.

Table 10. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 10

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta		
1 (Constant)	16.551	2.316		7.146	.000
Self-Judgment	.359	.144	.179	2.487	.014
2 (Constant)	18.235	2.424		7.522	.000
Self-Judgment	.638	.193	.319	3.303	.001
Over-identification	-.459	.214	-.207	-2.148	.033

Table 11. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 11

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta		
1 (Constant)	20.041	1.216		16.484	.000
Fear of compassion for self	.108	.053	.147	2.033	.044

However, the results of the regression did not highlight the significant contribution of any of the variables Self-Correction Function and Self-Persecution Function as statistically significant predictors for the manifestation of the Defender role, respectively for testing the 12th hypothesis.

*The dimensions of compassion as predictors for the Outsider role*

The role of Outsider has as predictor Self-Kindness, between the dimensions of Self-Compassion (B = -.233), with F = 6.9, p < .05, r<sup>2</sup> = .036.

Table 12. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 13

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta		
1 (Constant)	19.428	1.547		12.561	.000
Self-Kindness	-.233	.089	-.189	-2.621	.009

The regression results highlighted the statistically significant contribution of the variable Fear of compassion for self (B = .108,) with f = 24.7, p < .05 r<sup>2</sup> = .11, to the presented prediction model.

Table 13. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 14

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta		
1 (Constant)	20.041	1.216		16.484	.000
Fear of compassion for self	.108	.053	.147	2.033	.044

Also, the Self-Persecution Function is a significant but weak predictor (B = .130), with F = 5.1, p < .05, r<sup>2</sup> = .027, for the role of the Outsider.

Table 14. Coefficients of the prediction model associated with the hypothesis 15

Model	Coefficients <sup>a</sup>			t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta		
1 (Constant)	13.112	1.173		11.174	.000
Self-Persecution Function	.130	.058	.163	2.259	.025

**V. Discussion and conclusions**

Research data show that, among the areas of Self-Compassion, the Mindfulness ability explains 22% of the variance for the role of Victim: the lower the degree of Mindfulness (-.322), the greater the vulnerability to the role of Victim of the adolescent. The same results were recently reported by another study, which used pre and post intervention testing in a group of adolescents (Gonynor, 2016). This association may be due to the fact that an adolescent with an increased



capacity to accept their own feelings, states and thoughts, is less likely to be intimidated by external evaluations. Another study that considered Self-Compassion as a mediator in the relationship between victimization and lack of psychological adjustment in adolescents shows that the level of Self-Compassion decreases as the victim is the target of more aggression, confirming older findings that links the same negative relationship between abuse of young children and the level of Self-Compassion. Research also shows that adolescents with higher levels of Self-Compassion have lower levels of psychological maladaptation, and those with low levels of Self-Compassion have a higher risk of developing internalization and outsourcing problems (Jativa & Cerezo, 2014).

In the present study, only Self-Kindness and Isolation proved to be significant but weak predictors for the role of Bully (explaining together less than 1% of the variance); the lower the degree of Self-Kindness ( $B = -.207$ ) and the stronger the feeling of Isolation ( $B = .194$ ), the greater the vulnerability to the Bully role. Also, Self-Kindness is a significant but weak predictor for the role of Outsider (explains less than 4% of variance, negative correlation  $-.233$ ). Self-Judgment and Over-identification together explain 0.5% of the variance of the Defender role, being statistically significant predictors, however weak: the stronger the Self-Judgment (.638) and the weaker the Over-identification ( $-.459$ ), the higher likelihood to be involved as a Defender of the Victim in bullying situations. This covariation can be explained by the nature of Self-Judgment, which can cause an adolescent who is a passive witness to aggression to become an active witness, by triggering the mechanisms of moral competence. Also, Over-identification is a significant predictor for the role of Assistant, in a positive correlation.

The results are congruent with those of other studies, which show that the feeling of isolation has the strongest positive correlations with negative mental states, perceived stress and a low life satisfaction in adolescents. The Mindfulness component correlates negatively with negative mental states, which suggests that if adolescents manage to have a balanced perspective of the difficulties they have, stress levels decrease and well-being can set in (Bluth & Blunton, 2015). The greater the Fear of compassion for self, the more likely it is that the adolescent will take on the role of Outsider (explains 11% of the variance) in bullying situations. Also, the Fear of compassion for self, of compassion for others and of compassion from others

explains 15% of the variance for the role of Victim of bullying, proving to be, in sum, strong predictors of vulnerability to suffering from bullying. Other studies have shown that Fear of compassion for self correlates with emotional problems: adolescents with more fear of compassion for themselves tend to have higher levels of negative affect and more often resort to self-harm (Xavier, Cunha, & Pinto Gouveia, 2015). Victims have lower problem-solving skills and very low levels of positive self-concept (Coelho & Sousa, 2018). The results of a meta-analysis suggest that, given the very strong inverse correlation between Self-Compassion and psychological distress in adolescents (the analyzed studies took into account levels of anxiety, depression and stress), lack of self-compassion may play a significant role in producing and/ or maintaining emotional difficulties in adolescents (Marsh, Chan, & MacBeth, 2017). On the other hand, Self-Compassion correlates negatively with anxiety disorders, depression, burnout, shame, fear of failure, and positively with life satisfaction, social connection, emotional intelligence (Barnard & Curry, 2011), and also positively with social connection and subjective well-being (Batts Allen & Leary, 2010).

The Fear of compassion from others correlates positively with the vulnerability to the role of Bully and Assistant. The results are consistent with other research showing that although both Bullies and Defenders have higher levels of moral competence (integrating information about their beliefs and the results of their actions when evaluating what they do), Bullies have shortcomings/ challenges in terms of moral compassion, both compared to Victims and their Defenders, and resort to moral disengagement (Gini, Pozzoli, & Hauser, 2010).

The Self-Persecution Function of Self-Criticism is a significant and strong predictor for the role of Victim of bullying (explains 10% of the variance) and proves to be significant but weak for the roles of Bully and Outsider. The first association may imply that the adolescent with a high level of Self-Criticism explains to themselves the external aggression as having the source in the way their own person is composed. It is less likely to be able to get out of the Victim role, especially if the self is perceived as defective, inappropriate, undesirable and non-desired. Also, in adolescence, the individual tries to comply with the rules imposed by the group, especially in the context in which he spends most of his time in large school communities, where the emergence of comparisons between individuals is inherent, therefore a potential source of

envy and shame, and some studies show that the resort to bullying of some adolescents implies a very high degree of shame and self-criticism (Gilbert & Irons, 2009). Furthermore, those with a high degree of self-criticism seem to be less capable of supportive relationships in a group (op. cit., 2009).

A necessary future direction of research is the implementation of CFT (Compassion Focused Therapy)/CMT (Compassionate Mind Training)/CBCT (Cognitively-Based Compassion Training) intervention protocols with the application of the 4 instruments before and after the intervention, in order to identify the extent to which different targeted interventions on groups of adolescents involved in bullying cause changes in compassion and self-compassion and, subsequently, in adopting bullying roles, following the model of the interventions used in institutionalized care systems for groups of adolescents aged 13-17 (Reddy et al., 2013) or of the type of initiatives dedicated to decreasing aggression in school environments (U'Mofe Gordon, 2018; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009; Wellford & Langmead, 2015). Also, given the growing size of the phenomenon of cyberbullying, which is the prevalent form of bullying for older students, a future opening could be investigating the dimensions of Self-Compassion, Fear of compassion and the Functions of Self-Criticism in relation to the roles adopted by adolescents in cyberbullying, in order to verify the extent to which the ways of manifesting this aggression is correlated with various psychological profiles.

#### **Limits of the study**

The context of the onset of the SARS-Cov2 virus pandemic led to the closing down of all schools, including high schools, so that at the time of launching the online questionnaire and their distribution, students were already in isolation, most without other than maybe online educational interactions with their peers. That is why we take into account a distant reporting from the bullying situations experienced in the school environment. An obvious limitation of this study is that only questionnaires and self-report scales (common method error) were used, without further investigating the bullying situations experienced by students. At the same time, given the sensitive nature of the information requested, it is expected that, in the reporting of bullying situations in particular, there would have been a degree of social desirability affecting the responses. Although some research in the early 2000s suggested that bullying aggression peaked at 10-13 years and then decreased in frequency and intensity, subsequent studies, both

qualitative and quantitative, showed that the directives were not major in number, but in fact the desirability factor at self-reporting scales had an important effect in the later years of adolescence (Canales Urrea et al., 2018). Another limitation of the study is the convenience selection of participants, given that responses were requested not on the basis of random sampling procedures, but on the basis of access to student communities, especially through teachers and principals in some schools.

#### **Practical implications**

Compassionate Mind Training (CMT) exercises, including mindfulness, compassion-directed imagery, compassion-focused chair techniques, rhythm-based calm breathing techniques, and compassionate behaviors, are seen by Paul Gilbert as "neurophysiotherapy" exercises; through them, the individual trains his mind to function differently and thus creates new neural connections, relearning to experience self-confidence in interaction with others, instead of shame, and trains to tolerate stress and to replace self-criticism with self-compassion (Gilbert, 2005). It can be assumed that if in individual, group therapy, in personal development groups or in anti-bullying interventions in educational contexts, CMT-type protocols will be administered, in order to increase the capacity of mindfulness, students could detach more easily of shame, negative self-assessments and self-criticism and may be less permeable to situations of public shame, so that they would take less of the role of Victim, with which this trait is strongly associated. Given that the Fear of compassion, through all its areas, and the Self-Persecution Function of Self-Criticism are strong predictors for the role of Victim, and taking into account the fact that the level of victimization decreases the capacity for self-compassion (Jativa & Cerezo, 2014), therapeutic approaches should reach these areas; that would allow adolescents to explore self-criticism, reframe compassion and self-compassion, and learn, through sustained practice, how to express and accept such feelings. The way in which a teenager or a mature individual perceives kindness, gentleness, forgiveness is sculpted from early childhood, by the parents relating and reacting to the child's actions and by family and social group norms. By using Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) techniques, the individual can reinterpret forgiveness and put it into practice through specific exercises (Gilbert, 2005). Accepting feelings of self-compassion, compassion for others, and accepting the offered compassion could lead teens to move from the

role of uninvolved witness (Outsider) to that of Defender, or could decrease the frequency with which they take on the role of Victim – if they are explored therapeutically or through personal development and if new strategies for processing them are learned. The present study shows that the Fear of compassion from others correlates positively with the vulnerability to the roles of Bully and Assistant, so its approach could be useful in working with adolescents who frequently enter such roles in bullying situations, in order to avoid strategies of moral disengagement and to replace them with strategies of accepting one's actions and relating in terms of support and care with those in the same age group. The elements included in the CFT could be used for children and adolescents facing expressing and outsourcing disorders, including bullying, especially because they are criticized in their care relationships, by parents and adults in the school environment. CFT for children emphasizes self-kindness, understanding and encouragement, and takes into account both the client and their social context, by addressing the sources of external criticism (Carona et al., 2017; Gilbert & Choden, 2013). For self-critical tendencies, CFT uses the experiential dialogue approach, based also on the cognitive techniques of cognitive-behavioral therapies (CBT). Thus, interventions may include staging and role-playing against beliefs, in a Gestalt-experiential background manner, such as the use of the empty chair techniques. In fact, CMT brings consistent benefits in cases of trauma and emotional disorders, especially in people with a high level of Self-Criticism, accessing deep levels of self-image and addressing shame and guilt, in protocols integrated with CBT (Beaumont & Hollins Martin, 2015; Leaviss & Uttley, 2014). Studies show that intervention protocols for increasing self-compassion lead to significant decreases in adolescents' stress levels and significant increases in endurance, curiosity/ exploration and gratitude (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017). Interventions that cultivate and foster attention and compassion provide adolescents with tools they can use to reduce stress and increase resilience, encouraging ways in which they can appreciate themselves and their daily experiences and allowing them to engage in new experiences in a productive and healthy way (Marsh, Chan, & MacBeth, 2017; Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017). Some anti-bullying initiatives in schools have introduced compassionate approaches in schools in the form of psychological intervention for the whole community. Through days of psychoeducation, training events, lessons, experimentation courses, family evenings and group and individual interactions,

the aim is for all individuals to be aware of the model of compassion and self-compassion and to apply it not only in the educational setting, but also in the personal one, as a way of life. Among such examples we can mention group mindfulness exercises among students, the use of art (theater, fine arts) for expression, teachers dedicated programs of mindfulness, acceptance and compassion for students and themselves, days or evenings in the community, etc. Thus, the whole school community can be involved, to understand the affective functioning, the concept of compassion, to understand and replace relational systems based on shame, criticism and aggression and to practice compassion in everyday life (Wellford & Langmead, 2015; U'Mofe Gordon, 2018; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009).

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