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CROCHÍK, José Leon

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Autonomy in face of school authority, bullying and school performance

Autonomia frente à autoridade, bullying e desempenho escolar

José Leon CROCHÍK¹

Abstract

In order to verify the relationship between autonomy in face of authority, bullying and academic performance, we developed three scales that were applied to 274 ninth-graders from public schools in *São Paulo*, of which 122 were girls with a mean age of 14.1 years ($SD = 0.8$). It was found that the more students defended punishment for disobedience and respect for authority, the more frequently they were appointed as the best in class and vice versa; these students also considered being victims of violence, which indicates that even students with good performance do not necessarily develop autonomy in face of authority, as they may be following rules without thinking about them. Students who suffer violence tend not to be independent from authority. Further research including students from private schools could corroborate the results of this study.

Keywords: Academic achievement; Authority; Bullying; Personal autonomy.

Resumo

Com o objetivo de verificar a relação entre autonomia frente à autoridade, de um lado, com o bullying e o desempenho acadêmico, de outro, foram construídas três escalas aplicadas a 274 alunos do nono ano do ensino fundamental de escolas públicas paulistanas; 122 do sexo feminino, idade média de 14,1 anos ($DP = 0,8$). Verificou-se que quanto mais o aluno concordou com a necessidade da punição à desobediência e com o respeito à autoridade, mais foi indicado como melhor nas disciplinas e vice-versa e, mais se considerou como vítima da violência. Isso indica que mesmo alunos com bom desempenho não desenvolvem necessariamente autonomia frente à autoridade, pois podem estar seguindo normas sem refletir sobre elas, e que alunos que sofrem a violência tendem a não ser independentes dessa autoridade. Novos estudos considerando também alunos de escolas particulares poderiam, além de corroborar os resultados desta pesquisa, ampliar seu alcance.

Palavras-chave: *Rendimento escolar; Autoridade; Bullying; Autonomia pessoal.*

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¹ Universidade de São Paulo, Instituto de Psicologia, Laboratório de Estudos sobre o Preconceito. Av. Prof. Mello Moraes, 1721, Cidade Universitária, 05508-030, São Paulo, SP, Brasil. E-mail: <jlchna@usp.br>.

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The fight against the possibility of Auschwitz ever being repeated is what Adorno (1967/1995) defended as a fundamental principle for education. One of the important mechanisms to be developed by individuals, according to the author, is autonomy in the Kantian terms defined as "... the power of reflection, self-determination, non-participation" (p.125). The fact that Auschwitz was even possible proved that education failed in developing autonomous individuals, although education has also contributed to the forces that fight against terror. According to the author, not defending this principle could lead to the emergence of new genocides and the perpetuation of persecution of minorities. As acts of violence persist since the victory against the German National Socialism, one should continue to advocate the development of autonomy through education, particularly school education.

Barbosa and Wagner (2013) indicate that there are two distinct forms for understanding the concept of autonomy with respect to adolescence: one is opposite to parent dependency; the other is against heteronomy. In the latter, the affectionate relationship with the parents is important. Several studies, according to researchers, have shown that parental support is critical for autonomy. Most of the articles analyzed refer to behavioral autonomy on decision making and self-regulation; another type of study is emotional autonomy: differentiating themselves from their parents and the perception of human fallibility. There are also studies on cognitive autonomy related to independent thinking. The relationship between the three concepts of autonomy is visible: they all refer to the process of individuation, the process of differentiation from others, particularly from educational authorities. Autonomy does not necessarily mean being against adults, but it is against the notion of individualism: those who can apparently live without the others.

The formation of moral conscience, according to Freud (1930/1986), can result in rigidity, in which the values followed, without necessarily being accepted, are accepted due to fear of losing a loved one and at the same time,

feared, serving as a reference for the constitution of the psychic body, or it may not develop if there is no identification with authority. Neither of these two alternatives contributes to the formation of moral conscience, which is the basis for autonomy. Contrary to the categorical imperative, as developed by Kant (1785/1980), the first trend imposes values and principles to individuals who find it difficult to think about them rationally due to a real and/or imaginary threat that they realize that exists if they do not comply with these values. The ambivalent relationship regarding authority is transferred to these values that are not effectively assimilated, but rather increase anxiety when the individual doubts them, characterizing an authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950); the second trend, which neglects the transmission of values, fails to provide models for the identification of their children/students and without identification, the formation of moral conscience does not occur. These individuals constantly need external guidance to know what to do and constantly change their principles and values because they do not assimilate them through reflection and experience. This dichotomy, as well as others presented in the text, certainly indicates extreme models; in everyday life, different combinations between these two extremes must be identified; however, it is important to highlight each of the models for better clarity.

Roth, Kanat-Maymon, and Bibi (2010) conducted research with adolescent students and indicated that when prosocial values are deeply and significantly internalized, school violence can be avoided; in contrast, students who internalize these values superficially or do not internalize them are more prone to violence. These results confirm what has been previously discussed. The results of the study also showed that the more the students realize the rational and righteous actions of the teacher and the incentive to consider and respect others, the more they have integrated values and practice less bullying; whereas the student who acts for external reasons does not realize just and rational actions of teachers and tend to practice this

form of violence. Thus, for autonomy, authority that serves as reference, fosters the respect for others, as well as justice and reasonableness of actions affects the formation of the students and their autonomy, preventing bullying. Thus, autonomy prevents this form of violence more than external control which, according to these authors, is necessary when there is a lot of violence at school, but it is insufficient for securing behavior against bullying.

Therefore, with regard to autonomy, the reflection on the rationality of the rules to be assimilated, as defended by Adorno (1967/1995) and Roth et al. (2010) are imperative; and it is important because the rules, even if they come from tradition or adaptation, are not necessarily rational, therefore they cannot occur without reflection. As an example, consider the rules of fascist states: those related to the use of force for the submission of will should not be followed. According to these authors, one cannot accept rules without thinking about them when considering the autonomy of individuals.

If autonomy in face of educational authority is desired by the school, the hypothesis should be that those who show good school performance will be less dependent on authority and vice versa. Incorporating educational content and developing the required skills to enable thinking for oneself would be a way to prevent school bullying given that self-reflection promotes consideration and respect for each other (Roth et al., 2010).

Education, however, according to Adorno (1959/2004), has become basically adaptive and less focused on autonomy, reflection and experience; even the way of thinking encouraged at school is reducible to technical rules and not the contrast between concept and reality, which would delimit experience. Thus, there is no reflection on content and these are quickly being replaced, leaving no impressions on the individual. Thus, the concepts learned and skills developed would be external to individuals and therefore disposable, as the study of Roth et al. (2010) explains, and conducive to the lack of autonomy.

Thus, even good students would not develop

moral conscience and we could assume that they would follow the rules without necessarily reflecting on them, consequently getting good grades, while undisciplined students with poor school performance would tend not to follow rules and not necessarily be punished, at least with regard to indiscipline, since low grades are a consequence of poor school performance. In other words, even students with good academic performance could strictly follow rules without reflecting on them, and students with poor performance and bad behavior would not assimilate them. In this sense, it is interesting to note that Farisa and Felmleeb (2014) suggest that the school bully in general pursues the one who does not follow the rules and/or those who do not represent the standards: those who have delayed development body; low self-esteem or are lonely.

Bullying is considered a specific form of school violence which, according to Roth et al. (2010), Caravita and Cillessen (2012), Garandeau, Lee, and Salmivalli (2013), Ahn, Garandeau, and Rodkin (2010), Forlim, Stelko-Pereira, and Williams (2014), and Hein, Koka, and Hagger (2015), can be defined as a student being repeatedly subjected to various forms of aggression-physical, psychological and social violence-by a group or person with more power than him. This power can be associated with personal factors or characteristics of school classes, including school hierarchies, due to the popularity of the bullies and unpopularity of those who are the targets of aggression and do not to react to aggression (Antunes & Zuin, 2008; Crochík, 2012; Fante, 2005; Farisa & Felmleeb, 2014; Garandeau et al., 2013).

Autonomy in face of education authority, as discussed, seems to be associated with resistance to school violence and thus bullying; the more autonomy people have, the more differentiated they will be, and more able to control their own impulses and desires and vice versa. On this matter, research conducted by Centro de Empreendedorismo Social e Administração em Terceiro Setor and Fundação Instituto de Administração (2010) reports that family members complain that there is no school authority

or hierarchy; some teachers, in turn, claim that they are not prepared to curb indiscipline and they have to use coercion. To verify the effects of coercion on the violent behavior of students, Hein et al. (2015) conducted a study with adolescent students and found that the perception they had of control exercised by their teachers was associated with bullying, that is, the more they perceived control, the angrier they were, which was also evaluated, and bullying, which indicates that coercion of authority does not shy away from this type of violence, indicating, in addition, the strengthening of heteronomy.

There are few studies on the relationship between school violence and academic performance, as reported by Strøm, Thoresen, Wentzel-Larsen, and Dyb (2013); and in the study of Mehta, Cornell, Fan, and Gregory (2013) and Juvonen, Wang, and Espinoza (2011), who found that the greater school violence, the worse was school performance and vice versa. Levandoski and Cardoso (2013) affirm in their study that targets of bullying tend to be better in Portuguese and that the bullies tend to be considered the most popular, most beautiful and more successful in activities involving physical abilities.

Given the above considerations, the aim of this study was to assess the existing relations of autonomy in face of school authority with school performance and bullying. The hypothesis is that greater individual autonomy leads to less bullying. With regard to school performance, it can be assumed that different forms of heteronomy may distinguish those who have good academic performance from those who have not.

Method

Participants

The participants were 274 ninth-graders from four public schools in *São Paulo*; 122 of these

were girls (44.5%) and the mean age was 14.1 years ($SD = 0.8$). They had been attending the school for about 5.4 years ($SD = 2.7$ years) and their average socioeconomic level, as assessed by the *Associação Brasileira de Anunciantes/Associação Brasileira dos Institutos de Pesquisa de Mercado* (ABA/ABIPEME). Classification Criteria, was 22.6 points ($SD = 5.8$ points), which ranks among the C1 and B2 classes. The sample of participants in the study was not probabilistic which, according to Selltitz (1975), is relevant when the goal is to obtain a variety of factors that may exist in the population, the relationship with characteristics of the participants and not the estimate of the population parameters.

Instruments

The following instruments were developed for the research: Autonomy Scale in face of School Authority (Scale A), School Hierarchy Scale (Scale H), and the Bullying Verification Scale (Scale B). Although there may be scales tested in studies that assess autonomy, we preferred to test the hypotheses of this study by developing our own scales including the following theoretical references that guided it: the Critical Theory of Society and Psychoanalysis; the other two scales were similar to those of the research that served as reference, as it will be further explained. Although the study was based on more than one of the many existing scales to meet the objectives of the research, the scales are not similar.

Scale A was developed based on the texts of Adorno et al. (1950); Adorno (1965/1995; 1967/1995; 1959/2004) and Lasch (1983); it is composed of 10 Likert-type items ranging from one (full disagreement) to seven points (full agreement). The factor analysis using principal component method with Varimax rotation ($KMO = 0.585$; $\lambda^2(45) = 337.486$, $p < 0.00$) detected three factors. Factor 1 was called 'Punishment and Obedience' ($\alpha = 0.650$) and it consisted of the following questions with the factor loading in brackets: "The teacher should always be obeyed" (0.700); "Any infringement of

the rules must be punished" (0.677); "Disobeying the teacher should be punished" (0.731); "Teachers should always be respected" (0.663); agreement with these items indicated a tendency to need to punish those who break the rules, a 'blind' obedience to rules established and represented by school authority, even if they are not rational. Factor 2, 'Denial of Authority' ($\alpha = 0.529$), consisted of the following statements: "I do not need to be told what to do" (0.830); "Everyone is equal, there is no need for authority" (0.652); and "Teachers should let students solve their disagreements alone" (0.617); agreement with these items seems to reveal the denial of the need for authority, which may indicate self-sufficiency contrary to the needs of others for autonomy to be established. Finally, Factor 3, 'Punishment denial' ($\alpha = 0.462$), contained the following items: "If students do not know what they have done wrong, they should not be punished" (0.720); "The teacher should not punish undisciplined students" (0.645); "Being well assessed by the teacher is more important than learning" (0.641); agreement with these items seems to indicate resistance to punishment, which, as shown in the introduction, is sometimes necessary. Although the scale does not have good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.565$), the extracted factors seem to have construct validity; the correlations between scale A and each of the factors corroborate the Fascism Scale (Scale F) developed by Adorno et al. (1950) and translated by Crochík (2000). The correlation between Scale F and the values of each of the factors and overall score were as follows: Factor 1: $r(272) = 0.474$; Factor 2: $r(272) = 0.226$; Factor 3: $r(272) = 0.240$ and Scale A: $r(272) = 0.499$, with a significance of $p < 0.000$.

As we have discussed in the introduction, the lack of autonomy can lead to blind obedience to values and principles, in short, to authority, which was assessed by Factor 1, or its denial, assessed by two other factors, though differently. The higher the score in this scale, the greater was the lack of autonomy regarding school authority.

There was no significant difference between

genders in relation to the factors and overall score. The only significant correlation between age and factors was found for Factor 2, 'denial of authority': the older the student, the higher the score on this factor [$r(272) = 0.146$; $p < 0.05$]. Socioeconomic status did not correlate significantly with any of these factors.

In the School Hierarchy Scale (Scale H), we used the same procedure adopted by Ahn et al. (2010), de Bruyn, Cillessen, and Wissink (2010), Caravita and Cillessen (2012) and Li and Wright (2014), to verify the perceived popularity among peers; the students were asked to provide information about their classmates considering: the top three students in class; the three best students in Physical Education; the three most popular; the three worst in the class; the three worst in Physical Education; and the three most unpopular. Students could appoint the same colleague on more than one item as well as themselves. From their answers, we calculated six scores per student using the following formula: $I = (n/N) \times 100$, where: I indicates the choice of each participant in each item; n is the number of appointments of a particular student; and N is the number of students in class. The indicator ranges from zero - no appointment - up to 100 - everyone appointed the student. The higher the score, the higher was the student's performance was perceived by the peers as the best and/or worst in class; the best or worst in Physical Education; the most popular or unpopular. For this scale and the other one, no psychometric indicators were presented because, in both cases, the appointments and self-appointments were not related to items concerning opinions or attitudes; in the studies cited here, related to these two scales, these data are rarely available; this only occurred when there was more than one question to measure the appointment.

The Bullying Verification Scale (Scale B) was developed to obtain data on self-observations of bullying, as carried out by Hein et al. (2015), Roth et al. (2010), and Salmivalli, Kärnä, and

Poskiparta (2011) about participants being the bullies and/or victims. In these two situations, there are questions as to whether the participant offended/was the victim of the following nine forms of aggression at school: insults, nicknames, threats, physical assault, rumors, exclusion/rejection, destroying school material, taking money without permission, touching without consent; after each set of questions the student was asked if: 1 - acts of aggression were committed/suffered by a group or someone stronger; and 2 - if the same student was always the target; when the answer was yes to both questions, the participant was considered the bully and/or victim of bullying, noting that the latter is defined by repeated action on the same target by someone with more power, as discussed in the introduction. Through these categories we classified the involvement in bullying of each student: no participation; victim; victim and bully; and bully.

Procedures

The instruments were administered by two researchers at four public schools in *São Paulo*. The instructions were explained collectively and researchers answered the student's doubts during administration; at the end, the researchers verified if all the questions in the instruments had been answered. The administration of the instruments lasted about 30 minutes. The calculations were performed using the Predictive Analytics Software (PASW, Statistics software package, version 17). The Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to verify if there were any significant relationships between the scores obtained in the Autonomy Scale in face of Authority and the appointments of the students regarding their school performance. The analysis of variance and Student's *t* - test for independent samples were used to compare the groups according to the roles played by the participants in bullying and the scores on Autonomy Scale in face of Authority. The significance level adopted was 0.05.

The research project was submitted to

the Ethics Committee on Human Research of the *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo* in 2010, and approved under Protocol number 066/2011 on March 28, 2011. Students whose guardians signed the Term of Informed Consent participated in the research.

Results and Discussion

The score means on the factors in the Autonomy Scale in face of School Authority indicate that the students agree with the need for punishment for disobedience and respect for educators (Factor 1: $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.38$) and a tendency to disagreement with punishment denial (Factor 3: $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.52$), which seems to be consistent; with regard to the factor 'denial of authority', the mean score ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.66$) was close to the midpoint of the scale (4 points). The Friedman test revealed a significant difference between the responses to the three factors [$\chi^2 (2) = 129.98$; $p < 0.01$]. These results seem to indicate a certain resistance to obeying rules.

From the correlations among the three factors and total score in Scale A and academic performance, measured by appointments from peers, two significant correlations were found: one was related to the factor 'punishment and obedience' and appointments of the student as the best in class: the more the student agreed with the need for punishment for disobedience and respect for authority, the more frequently the student was appointed as best in class and vice versa [$r (272) = 0.190$; $p < 0.01$]. The other significant correlation involved the same factor and the appointment as being the worst in class; this correlation [$r (272) = -0.204$; $p < 0.01$], unlike the other one, is negative and thus: the higher the score on this factor, the less frequently was the student appointed as the worst in class and vice versa. The two correlations seem to show the same phenomenon: in this sample, obedience to the rules and the need for punishing those who do not comply with them

is related to academic achievement, as perceived by peers.

As mentioned in the introduction, non-reflected compliance to authority may reward those who follow the rules with good grades, but that does not necessarily indicate autonomy, it may imply awareness of values and introjected, but not internalized, rules, as it is clear in the study of Roth et al. (2010), which reinforces Adorno's analysis (1967/1995), who argues that our education is, above all, adaptive and not necessarily critical. Whereas students who had been considered the worst regarding their overall school performance may show a different behavior, but, according to Roth et al. (2010), contrary to autonomy: an externalized consciousness that does not accept any rules not even superficially; thus, students appointed as the best and worst, regarding their school performance, tend to act in a heteronomous

way. It should be noted that, in accordance with the empirical study of Adorno et al. (1950), blind compliance to authority is associated with an authoritarian personality and those who deny it are rebellious or delinquent.

As mentioned above, the subjects were classified in relation to their involvement in bullying according to the following categories: no involvement; victim; victim and bully; and bully. Most respondents (73%) were not involved in school bullying; only 27% participated in this form of violence; of which approximately half were victims and about one-fifth were bullies; almost one quarter of these students suffered and practiced bullying. The groups consisting of the types of involvement in bullying were compared to the scores of the factors in Scale A using analysis of variance. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Means and standard deviation of scores obtained by the participants in the factors of Scale A by type of involvement in bullying

Factors	No involvement		Victim		Victim and bully		Bully	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Respect and obedience	4.97	1.33	5.22	1.06	4.15	1.73	4.13	1.65
Denial of authority	3.74	1.71	3.48	1.45	3.68	1.78	3.48	1.39
Punishment denial	3.28	1.55	3.09	1.45	3.35	1.52	3.17	1.41
Scale A	4.09	0.98	4.06	0.73	3.77	1.12	3.64	0.99

Nota: M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation.

There were significant differences among the groups only for the factor 'punishment and obedience' [$F(3 \text{ and } 270) = 4.751; p < 0.01$]. A significant difference was found when comparing the group of victims with the bullies for the factor 'punishment and obedience' [$t(53) = 2.959; p < 0.05$]. According to the data in Table 1, students who were considered victims of bullying agreed more with the statements in this factor than the bullies. Non-retaliation of the target of bullying against violence could be partially explained because they respect and obey authority, which can and should represent criticism of violence among peers, such as bullying; these students may have assimilated the cultural values transmitted by the

teachers, but they are not able to defend themselves against hostility.

Groups of non-participants and those who were victims and perpetrators of aggression were also compared for the same factor. Again, the difference obtained was significant [$t(217) = 2.548; p < 0.05$]. This result strengthens the previous one, for those who were not involved in bullying showed greater agreement with respect and obedience to authority than their peers who were simultaneously involved in both roles. Indeed, school authority should intervene when aggression among students is perceived. Punishment, as representative of rules, provided they are rational, contrasts with impunity that, according to Bleichmar (2008), contributes to a

state of social confusion. According to Roth et al. (2010), when there is a lot of violence at school, control by coercion is required before students can introject the set of rules to be respected. However, this form of action against the rules may make it difficult to think about what generates violence. Thus, if authority is practiced in these situations, educational activities such as debates, information and awareness to suffering could be raised (Adorno et al., 1950; Hein et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2010).

The results seem sufficiently compelling to suggest that further research should be conducted using the Autonomy Scale in face of School Authority by including more items and thus greater internal consistency and with a more representative sample, including private school students. With regard to the school practices, once the results of the present study are confirmed by other research, one could consider the reasons why most 14-15-year-old high school students have not developed a satisfactory autonomy in face of school authority. Perhaps one of the main aspects for undeveloped autonomy of students is the insistence on obedience to rules without further discussing the rationale behind it, which can occur due to the weakening of authority (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1956/1973). Therefore, not discussing these rules with students does not contribute to the development of their autonomy.

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