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# BULLYING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELL-BEING IN ADOPTED ADOLESCENTS.

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**Abstract:** Despite the large body of evidence on bullying, little attention has been paid to adoptees, who represent a population more vulnerable to experiencing problems in peer relationships and school adjustment. This study presents the results from the Spanish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study. We studied bullying among 251 adopted and 753 non-adopted adolescents aged between 11 and 15 years and its relationship with their well-being. We analyzed different roles (bully, victim, and bully-victim) and types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying). In addition, we explored possible differences concerning the type of adoption (domestic or intercountry). The results show that domestic adoptees usually experience more bullying, whereas intercountry adoptees showed no differences compared with non-adoptees. On the other hand, the relationship between bullying and wellbeing is virtually identical for both types of adoptees and non-adoptees. Thus, adoption alone does not seem to be a risk factor for bullying. It is the particular circumstances surrounding each type of adoption what can put adolescents at a greater risk. Teachers must pay special attention to domestic adoptees and improve their peer relationships.

**Keywords:** Adoption, adolescence, bullying, school, well-being.

## Highlights:

- Few studies on adoption address the phenomenon of bullying in adoptees.
- Domestic adoptees are more involved in episodes of bullying than non-adoptees.
- No differences in bullying episodes between intercountry adoptees and non-adoptees.
- Race is not a critical component in explaining bullying in Spain, but adversity is.
- Being a bully or a victim is related to decreased wellbeing, whether adopted or not.

When a child is adopted, through either domestic or intercountry adoption and at any age, one of the main challenges they will have to face is their schooling. Previous research has found that adopted girls and boys are more likely to have problems at school. These problems are due to different factors, such as their history of adversity, acquisition of a new language (in the case of intercountry adoption), or difficulties in meeting academic objectives when undergoing a very intense emotional process, like being adopted by a new family, and recovering from a process of adversity (Barca, Brenlla, & Ramudo, 2017; Conti-Ramsden, Durkin, Simkin, & Knox, 2009; Fishman & Harrington, 2007). Previous research has found that adopted girls and boys experience a greater number of learning problems and special educational needs than non-adoptees (Barca et al., 2017; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1993; DeJong & Hodges, 2015).

However, school is more than learning academic content, as it is also an ideal context for socializing and learning about relationships between peers. Nevertheless, adoptees may have some difficulties in this area too. Recent studies on recovery during adoption have found that socio-emotional aspects need a long time to recover from adversity (Juffer, van Ijzendoorn, & Palacios, 2011; Palacios, Román, Moreno, León, & Peñarrubia, 2014). In addition, adopted children may be more disruptive in the classroom, as they may experience more problems regarding impulsivity, disruptive, or defiant behaviors; have difficulty concentrating and remaining focused; or face issues in controlling their emotional regulation, etc. (Brown, Waters, & Shelton, 2017; Howard et al., 2004). As a result of the foregoing, it is not unusual for adopted boys and girls to have problems in relating to their peers.

Furthermore, they must also confront the stigma associated with adoption, which Steinberg and Hall have named "adoptism". According to March (1995), this stigma may lead both teachers and classmates (as well as the rest of society) to make biased, negative attributions about an adopted child's behavior based on their awareness of the child's adopted status and the possible associated prejudices. Therefore, adoption means a distinguishing feature in the classroom, which may result in these boys and girls being marginalized and excluded from school (Brodzinsky et al., 1993; Juffer & Tieman, 2009; Neil, 2012). This type of marginalization may be even greater in the case of intercountry adoptees who have racial traits that are different to their adoptive parents or the majority of those in their educational setting, which may lead to a double stigma (McGinnis, Livingston, Ryan, & Howard, 2009).

If we add discrimination, marginalization, and racism in the school setting to the social-skills difficulties that adoptees may have in relating to their peers, then references to bullying are inevitable. There is a certain consensus about the definition of the bullying phenomenon (Ortega, Del Rey, & Mora-Merchán, 2001; Sjursø, Fandrem, & Roland, 2016; Solberg & Olweus, 2003): a situation whereby a pupil is frequently and intentionally attacked by another student or other students who are in a position of power compared to the victim. Similarly, there is a consensus when it comes to acknowledging the different roles in bullying (Stassen Berger, 2007; Theriot, Dulmus, Sowers, & Johnson, 2005): bully, victim, and observer. In recent years, a fourth role has emerged: the bully-victim (Waasdorp, Mehari, Milam, & Bradshaw, 2018).

Previous research found that bullying has significant impacts on the well-being of boys and girls (García-Moya, Suominen & Moreno, 2014), including a greater incidence of psychiatric symptoms, suicidal ideations and suicide among its victims (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould,

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2007). Bully-victims are the group that demonstrates the worst psychiatric outcomes in adulthood (Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, & Schwarts, 2011).

In addition to the interest in identifying different roles involved in bullying, an important part of the field has focused on studying the individual characteristics of victims and bullies. Some of the risk factors identified in previous research are irremediably present in adoption situations, such as child abuse, institutionalization, belonging to ethnic minorities, learning difficulties, language difficulties, poor academic performance, adjustment issues, social-skills difficulties, etc. (Raaska et al., 2012). However, despite what would be expected, there is little research in the field of adoption that addresses this phenomenon head on. It is more common to find research referring indirectly to bullying with a focus on discrimination or microaggressions against adoptees because of their status of adoptees or their race (Baden 2016; Garber & Grotevant, 2015). Other studies, such as those of Meese (2012) and Soares, Barbosa-Ducharme, Palacios, and Fonseca (2017), analyzed the influence that social reactions in the school setting have on the psychological adjustment and on the feelings and ease of adoptees with respect to how they have internalized their adoptee status.

Within the body of specific research on bullying in adoption, there is a noteworthy study by Raaska et al. (2012) carried out in Finland with intercountry adoptees. They found that the prevalence of involvement in bullying was lower in the non-adopted sample compared to the adoptee sample. Regarding the adoptees, the results of this study showed that 19.8% of the participants reported having been victims of bullying, while 8% acknowledged that they had been bullies and 4.95% were bully-victims. Furthermore, this study found differences in areas of origin, highlighting a higher level of bullying among those adopted in Russia or Estonia compared to those adopted in China.

Those differences between birth areas are part of the diversity within adoption. Since Haugaard (1998) wrote about heterogeneity in adoption, recent publications have paid special attention to the diversity that exists among adoptees (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Paniagua, Moreno, Román, Palacios, Grotevant, & Rivera, 2019). According to those authors, adoptees can differ enormously from each other due to a great variety of criteria, such as their domestic or intercountry origin. Regarding the comparison between domestic and intercountry adoption, most of the research has reported better adjustment among intercountry adoptees than in domestic adoptions (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). However, other studies have not found these differences (van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009).

Due to the lack of specific research on bullying in adoption, the seriousness of this phenomenon, and its high prevalence among adopted boys and girls, the present study aims to analyze this phenomenon in greater depth. To do so, we analyzed self-reported measures of bullying of adopted boys and girls who participated in the HBSC study. The HBSC study is a collaborative study by the World Health Organization, which has been conducted every four years since 1982. More than 40 countries participated in the edition of this study in 2014. However, Spain is the only country in the international network to have targeted the area of adoption in its research.

In light of the *boom* of intercountry adoption experienced in Spain (Selman, 2009), as well as the fact that many adopted children would currently be within the age range of this Study, the Spanish HBSC team decided to add some questions in the questionnaire to identify adoptees. This provided us with a chance to study

adoptees from a novel point of view in the research on adoption. Studying adolescent populations instead of child populations contributes to the extension of literature on adoption studies. Furthermore, the adoptees themselves completed the questionnaire, which thereby offered a vision that has great ecological validity and high personal meaning on how adopted adolescents see themselves. Finally, the characteristics of the sampling and the large number of adolescents who participated in the 2014 edition of the study (representative of Spanish adolescents aged between 11 and 15 years) provided not only a powerful reference group, but also a representative sample of adopted Spanish adolescents of these ages and a sufficient number to explore their diversity, thus allowing for different intra-group comparisons.

The present study has two different objectives. First, we sought to learn about the presence of the bullying phenomenon within the adopted population by comparing the results between non-adoptees, intercountry adoptees, and domestic adoptees. Based on previous studies (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005; Moreno, Paniagua et al., 2016), we hypothesized that more favorable outcomes would be found in the reference group (i.e., non-adoptees) than in the adoptees group, as well as more favorable outcomes in intercountry adoptees than in domestic ones. Second, since both adoption and bullying have been linked to emotional adjustment problems, we analyzed whether being an adoptee increases the likelihood of experiencing lower levels of perceived well-being.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The present paper is part of the 2014 HBSC study, which was approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the University of Seville. In order to ensure the representativeness of the sample, we employed a random multi-stage sampling stratified by conglomerates, taking into account the type of school (state or private schools), type of habitat (rural or urban), and the geographical area. From the original sample (23,349 adolescents), 251 were adopted adolescents (0.8%) between 11 and 15 years of age; 40.6% were boys and 59.4% girls; and their mean age at the time of the study was 13.32 years old. Adopted adolescents were identified through the HBSC questionnaire using two questions that served as a filter. These questions appeared in different parts of the questionnaire. The first appeared at the beginning of the questionnaire along with other questions regarding socio-demographic details. The second one was further along in the questionnaire, included among the questions referring to family context. The adopted group selected for this research was composed of those adolescents who answered the two questions in a way that they claimed to be adopted.

The adoptees were part of the intercountry adoption *boom* mentioned above. Thus, 62.5% adolescents came from intercountry adoption (33.1% boys, mean age 13.38), and 37.5% came from domestic adoption (53.2% boys, mean age 13.23). A comparative sample similar to the adopted group in terms of sex and age was randomly selected from the global sample using the matching technique, which is widely used in control studies (Pearce, 2016). We used the resulting sample of 753 non-adopted adolescents as a reference group. Adolescents who were living in a welfare center, foster family or any other family situation related to the welfare system were removed from the reference group.

### **Procedure**

We used a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) system in data collection to allow subjects to fill out the questionnaires over the Internet. The use of information and communication technology made it possible to automatically incorporate answers into the project database, reducing the potential human error associated with this process. Tablets were used instead of computers in those schools with insufficient computers or a poor Internet connection.

We provided a passive consent form to the students' parents and, before the onset of the study, students were briefed, given instructions regarding the questionnaire and informed of its voluntary nature. Data collection complied with the requirements dictated by the HBSC international protocol (Moreno, Rivera et al., 2016). Based on those requirements, students answered the questionnaires themselves, their anonymity was guaranteed, and the questionnaires were completed online (in approximately one hour) using the computer or tablets at school under the supervision of instructed staff.

Once the data was collected, we used the HBSC international protocol to treat the data. According to the protocol, the participants with a response rate lower than 40%, without basic demographic information and a high probability of acquiescence were deleted (which was 7% of the collected sample). Regarding the missing data, from the total adoptees between 11 and 15 years old that participated in this study, we had enough information to analyze 72.13% of them in this article. Concerning the adolescents with missing values, we

decided not to include the missing values and analyze only the individuals with valid values in the analyzed variables.

### Measures

In accordance with the objectives of this paper, we selected the variables of sex, age, type of adoption, and questions on bullying included in the HBSA questionnaire. Questions about bullying were taken from the Revised Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996). The advantages of this instrument, which is one of the most commonly used in international research (Paez, 2018), include the incorporation of a clear time reference (the last two months) and a definition of bullying preceding the questions. The aim of this definition is to help the pupil to identify episodes of bullying and distinguish them from other types of violence or school conflicts.

This instrument includes a global measure that enables both *victims* (“How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?”), *bullies* (“How often have you taken part in bullying another student(s) at school in the past couple of months?”), and *bully-victims*, as a result of their combination, to be identified. These questions were answered separately on a Likert scale with 5 possible answers (“1. I have not bullied another student(s) / I have not been bullied at school in the past couple of months; 2. It has happened once or twice; 3. 2 or 3 times a month; 4. About once a week; 5. Several times a week”). For the purpose of this research this indicator, obtained between a single item per each of three categories of involvement in bullying phenomenon, was called “*perceived bullying*” (frequency with which students said they had been victims of bullying in the last two months, using the conventional cut-off of 2 or 3 times a month or more). Moreover, a measure named as “*observed bullying*” was calculated (these two indicators have already been used in previous research—García-Moya et al., 2014; Sánchez-Queija, García-Moya, & Moreno, 2017; Theriot et al., 2005).

This second indicator was also a measure of prevalence (“How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months in the ways listed below?”), but was a behavioral based question that stemmed from the prevalence of bullying calculated based on the responses the students gave regarding a series of specific experiences of bullying (1. “I was called mean names, was made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way; 2. Other students left me out of things on purpose, excluded me from their group of friends, or completely ignored me; 3. I was hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around, or locked indoors; 4. Other students told lies or spread false rumors about me and tried to make others dislike me; 5. Other students made sexual jokes, or gestures to me.”). In addition to the foregoing, a specific question referring to having been a victim of cyberbullying was added (6. Someone sent mean instant messages, email or text messages, posts, created a website making fun of me; 7. Someone took unflattering or inappropriate pictures of me without permission and posted them online). The Likert scale on which the pupils marked their answers also ranged from 1 to 5, with the same categories as those mentioned above. The value of the maximum frequency given to these items was used; thus, as explained below, an adolescent whose answers show a frequency of at least 2 or 3 times per month in one of the five items was considered a victim of bullying. Observed bullying can detect a proportion of victims that do not identify themselves as such (see a discussion of this in Sánchez-Queija et al., 2017).

We employed the Stassen Berger classification (2007) to define the types of bullying, a classification commonly used in previous research (Avilés, Iruñia, García-López, & Caballo, 2011; Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Ortega et al., 2001; Sánchez-Queija et al., 2017). According to this classification, there is physical abuse

(e.g. hitting, kicking or pushing), verbal abuse (e.g. insulting, mocking or making fun) and relational abuse (e.g. ignoring, making up gossip), in addition to cyberbullying (publishing inappropriate photos online without consent or sending sexual texts). This classification took shape in physical (item 3), verbal (items 1 and 5), relational (items 2 and 4), and cyber (items 6 and 7) questions. The responses to all the items mentioned were dichotomized using the cut-off point recommended by Solberg and Olweus (2003): a victim is anyone who has experienced episodes of bullying at a rate equal to or above 2 or 3 times per month in the last two months, and a bully is anyone who has participated in episodes of bullying with the same frequency.

We used the Kidscreen-10 index to evaluate the well-being of adolescents. This instrument produces a global health-related quality of life index with 10 items covering psychological, physical and social areas (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2001). The items that composed the Kidscreen-10 Index include feeling sad, lonely, well and fit, full of energy, having enough time for themselves, doing the things that they want in their free time, having a good time with friends, receiving fair treatment from their parents, getting on well at school, and being able to pay attention/concentrate. The Cronbach alpha was .83.

### **Data Analyses**

We used the IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 software to perform the different statistical analyses. First, the participants were divided into non-adoptees, intercountry adoptees and domestic adoptees. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample were examined using descriptive statistics. At the time of the study, we found differences in sex and age between adoptees and non-adoptees, as well as between different types of adoptees.

We used a logistic regression controlling sex and age to analyze the presence of the distinct roles and types of bullying among the different groups of adoptees. For each logistic regression model, odds ratios (ORs) and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs) were reported. We carried out a general linear model (GLM) controlling sex and age using well-being as the dependent variable. An analysis of the effect that interaction of perceived and observed bullying and being adopted had on well-being was added. We used the partial eta squared statistic to measure the effect size (0.01-0.059 small effect; 0.06-0.13 medium effect;  $\geq 0.14$  large effect; Cohen, 1988).

### **Results**

Table 1 provides comparison data for non-adoptees, intercountry adoptees and domestic adoptees. We used the question referring to perceived bullying in the first three rows to identify the types of roles. In the following five rows, which focused on victimization and the types of victimization, we used the responses to the items in the observed bullying indicator. As pointed out in the previous paragraph, we carried out a logistic regression. Firstly, we observed that all the comparisons reached statistical significance and the Odd Ratios showed a higher risk of being involved in a bullying situation in domestic adoptees than in non-adoptees. Thus, domestic adoptees have a greater tendency to be victims (both observed and perceived), but also to be bullies, with a slightly higher incidence of bully-victims among them than the non-adoptee group (10.6% and 1.7% respectively). All type of observed bullying (being a victim of physical, verbal, relational abuse or



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cyberbullying) were more common among domestic adoptees than non-adoptees. No differences were found in any comparison between the reference group (non-adoptees) and intercountry adoptees.

Furthermore, Table 1 includes a comparison between domestic and intercountry adoptees. All the comparisons (except perceived bully;  $p = .100$ ) were significant. The results showed that domestic adoptees were more at risk of being involved in all bullying roles (with the exception of the perceived bully, as mentioned) and in all the categories considered as observed in comparison to the intercountry adoptees.

Finally, the focus was shifted towards the relationship between bullying and perceived well-being, as well as towards the role of being a domestic or intercountry adoptee in this relationship. Firstly, Table 2 shows a significant relationship between all the bullying variables (with the exception of observed bullying and relational abuse) and perceived well-being. With respect to the type of adoption variable, being a domestic or intercountry adoptee did not make any difference to the relationship between bullying and well-being.

**Table 1** Logistic regression among non-adoptees (NA), intercountry adoptees (I) and domestic adoptees(D) concerning the types and roles of bullying considered

		NA	I	D		<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>
		% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )	% ( <i>n</i> )			
Perceived victim	No	95.2% (717)	94.9% (149)	78.7% (74)	NA-I	.823	OR = 1.09 (0.50-2.41)
	Yes	4.8% (36)	5.1% (8)	21.3% (20)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 5.283 (2.90-9.64)
					I-D	<.001***	OR = 4.94 (2.04-11.93)
Perceived bully	No	96.0% (723)	93.0% (146)	84.0% (79)	NA-I	.062	OR = 1.99 (0.97-4.09)
	Yes	4.0% (30)	7.0% (11)	16.0% (15)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 4.21 (2.15-8.25)
					I-D	.100	OR = 2.05 (0.87-4.84)
Perceived bully-victim <sup>a</sup>	No	98.4% (740)	98.1% (154)	89.3% (84)	NA-I	.800	OR = 1.18 (0.33-4.20)
	Yes	1.7% (13)	1.9% (3)	10.6% (10)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 6.21 (2.62-14.71)
					I-D	.014*	OR = 5.39 (1.41-20.57)
Observed victim	No	80.2% (604)	76.4% (120)	57.4% (54)	NA-I	.283	OR = 1.25 (0.83-1.89)
	Yes	19.8% (149)	23.6% (37)	42.6% (40)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 3.00 (1.92-4.70)
					I-D	.006**	OR = 2.21 (1.26-3.88)
Physical abuse	No	97.5% (734)	94.9% (149)	84.0% (79)	NA-I	.066	OR = 2.200 (0.95-5.19)
	Yes	2.5% (19)	5.1% (8)	16% (15)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 6.81 (3.30-14.04)
					I-D	.015*	OR = 3.13 (1.24-7.86)
Verbal abuse	No	86.7% (653)	94.9% (149)	69.1% (65)	NA-I	.265	OR = 1.31 (0.82-2.10)
	Yes	13.3% (100)	5.1% (8)	30.9% (29)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 2.89 (1.78-4.71)
					I-D	.014*	OR = 2.17 (1.17-4.03)
Relational abuse	No	87.8% (661)	84.1% (132)	69.1% (65)	NA-I	.230	OR = 1.34 (0.83-2.17)
	Yes	12.2% (92)	15.9% (25)	30.9% (29)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 3.25 (1.99-5.33)
					I-D	.011*	OR = 2.24 (1.20-4.19)
Cyberbullying	No	96.1% (724)	93.0% (146)	81.9% (77)	NA-I	.823	OR = 1.09 (0.50-2.41)
	Yes	3.9% (29)	7.0% (11)	18.1% (17)	NA-D	<.001***	OR = 5.28 (2.90-9.64)
					I-D	.017*	OR = 2.720 (1.19-6.20)

<sup>a</sup>The “no” category in perceived bully-victim comprises three groups: victims only, bullies only and those who do not play any role.

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of the perceived well-being variable for non-adoptees, domestic adoptees and intercountry adoptees, and the results of the GLM including the relationship between bullying and well-being (W), and the analysis of the interaction of both with the type of adoption (EI)

		Non-adoptees <i>M (SD)</i>	Domestic <i>M (SD)</i>	Intercountry <i>M (SD)</i>	Regression
Perceived victim	No	50.75 (9.55)	47.45 (10.38)	49.90 (9.43)	W <sup>b</sup> : $p = .026$ ; $\eta^2 = .008$
	Yes	44.20 (11.86)	42.75 (16.36)	48.96 (13.11)	EI <sup>c</sup> : $p = .409$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .002$
Perceived bully	No	50.61 (9.73)	47.17 (11.55)	50.11 (9.32)	W: $p = .010$ ; $\eta^2 = .010$
	Yes	46.12 (9.25)	41.99 (13.36)	46.43 (12.69)	EI: $p = .953$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .000$
Perceived bully-victim <sup>a</sup>	No	46.27 (11.07)	45.29 (11.98)	48.84 (10.14)	W: $p = .007$ ; $\eta^2 = .011$
	Yes	47.52 (7.46)	40.78 (16.43)	47.17 (18.88)	EI: $p = .800$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .000$
Observed victim	No	51.42 (9.21)	50.37 (9.87)	51.67 (8.68)	W: $p = .064$ ; $\eta^2 = .006$
	Yes	46.41 (10.88)	40.88 (12.44)	43.62 (10.08)	EI: $p = .085$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .005$
Physical abuse	No	50.59 (9.65)	47.69 (11.31)	50.01 (9.58)	W: $p = .022$ ; $\eta^2 = .008$
	Yes	44.50 (12.35)	39.33 (13.20)	46.86 (9.96)	EI: $p = .570$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .001$
Verbal abuse	No	51.23 (9.26)	49.17 (10.53)	50.94 (8.97)	W: $p = .044$ ; $\eta^2 = .007$
	Yes	45.22 (11.28)	40.26 (12.71)	43.96 (10.88)	EI: $p = .525$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .001$
Relational abuse	No	51.01 (9.27)	49.42 (9.94)	51.20 (8.93)	W: $p = .053$ ; $\eta^2 = .007$
	Yes	46.20 (12.11)	39.68 (13.38)	42.13 (9.81)	EI: $p = .071$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .006$
Cyberbullying	No	50.61 (9.59)	48.44 (10.43)	50.31 (9.23)	W: $p = .039$ ; $\eta^2 = .007$
	Yes	46.48 (12.89)	38.29 (14.31)	43.07 (12.56)	EI: $p = .209$ ; $\eta_p^2 = .003$

<sup>a</sup>The “no” category in perceived bully-victim comprises three groups: victims only, bullies only and those who do not play any role; <sup>b</sup>W: Main effect of bullying on perceived well-being; <sup>c</sup>EI: Effect of the interaction of bullying and type of adoption on perceived well-being.

## Discussion

The first aim of this study was to research the phenomenon of bullying among the adopted population. First, we compared intercountry and domestic adoptees to non-adoptees. In this regard, our initial hypotheses were confirmed. Domestic adoptees proved to be more involved in episodes of bullying than non-adoptees in all the variables used (types of bullying and roles). However, this situation was not the same for intercountry adoptees. Intercountry adoptees were not more involved in episodes of bullying than non-adoptees.

By dividing the sample of adoptees into domestic and intercountry, we observed that intercountry adoptees were less involved in bullying than domestic adoptees, which confirmed our initial hypothesis. These results show that race is not the critical component behind this kind of bullying, as the domestic adoptees were more heavily involved in bullying compared to intercountry adoptees, some of which were of other races. Instead, some of the aspects of social competence that adoptees struggle with the most may have played a more critical role in bullying than race. It is important to point out that domestic adoption in Spain always starts within the child protection system, meaning that these children have gone through situations such as neglect, maltreatment, and abuse, and the majority of them have been institutionalized prior to adoption (Palacios, 2010). In addition, they have experienced this for a longer period of time, so they usually end up with adoptive families when they are older (Palacios, Román, & Camacho, 2011; Román, 2007; Observatorio de la Infancia, 2011). As illustrated, the starting point of domestic adoptees may add even more risk factors for bullying than the starting point of some intercountry adoptees. This shows that adoption itself does not appear to be a risk factor for involvement in bullying. Instead, the circumstances surrounding the adoption, and especially those that are more common in one type of adoption (domestic) than in the other, appear to have a key influence.

The second aim of this study was to analyze whether being an intercountry or domestic adoptee made any difference to the relationship between bullying and perceived well-being. Firstly, our results show a close relationship between bullying and impoverished subjective well-being. Conversely, the types of adoption (domestic/intercountry) did not seem to have any important additional influence on this relationship. Thus, knowing that there is only a slightly larger effect of perceived well-being when interpersonal abuse is experienced by an adopted person, we can say that being involved in bullying reduces levels of perceived well-being in almost the same way, regardless of being an adoptee or not.

In sum, adoption itself is not a risk factor for being involved in bullying. Instead, the factor is the circumstances surrounding the adoption, and those that are more common in one type of adoption than in the other. We also find that there are no differences between non-adoptees, intercountry, and domestic adoptees in terms of the relationship between bullying and perceived well-being: bullying reduces feelings of well-being and it does so in a very similar way across the three groups.

In recent years, many adolescents remain victims of bullying in schools despite the attention paid to this phenomenon (Inchley et al., 2020). Whether adolescents are adopted or not, bullying produces important negative outcomes. Both schools and society at large have to rely on the scientific community to implement evidence-based programs to reduce this phenomenon, which will improve the quality of life of children and adolescents inside and outside of the school. In Spain, school teachers may consider paying special attention to domestic adoptees, helping children build a story of recovery rather than increased adversity.

## **Limitations**

The present study has a number of limitations derived from the nature of the HBSC study. First, the fact that the research does not focus exclusively on adoption prevented the inclusion of relevant information regarding the past of these adolescents, which made it impossible to study the relationship between bullying experiences and their pre-adoption information. On the other hand, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, the relationships identified were interpreted based on theoretical frameworks of reference, without being able to establish causal relationships. Future research may help to broaden the field of knowledge by determining causal relationships through longitudinal research or linking bullying with the boys and girls' previous history. Lastly, despite the fact that the 2014 edition of the HBSC study was based on a sample of 23,349 participants, only 251 reported that they were adopted. This is a reduced sample size that could have consequences related to the statistical power. This limitation prevented any comparison between areas of origin and a more confident exploration of the relationship between race and bullying, or the relationship between participating in the phenomenon of bullying and perceived well-being. The missing data presented in this study could also have statistical consequences. However, the imputation is a methodology not recommended in stratified multi-stage sampling studies, as the HBSC study (Fay, 1991).

Despite these restrictions, the present study also shows great strengths. For a start, as Miller, Fan, and Grotevant (2005) said in reference to the Add Health study, the HBSC study is a type of study that, despite not being designed exclusively with the aim of studying adoption, it provides new information and large samples, which allow to study other interesting topics. Secondly, it has access to a representative sample of adopted adolescents in Spain, a leading country in intercountry adoption in the early years of the 2000s. In turn, this provides more in-depth understanding of the bullying phenomenon among adoptees, which helps to enhance knowledge. In addition, this study gives an exceptional insight into the adopted population, as the adoptees themselves reported on their own situation (instead of letting adults do it); Moreover, the participants in this study belong to the general population instead of being clinical samples, which has usually been the case in previous research.

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