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# School Belongingness and Coping with Victimisation in Bullied and Non-bullied Students: A Discriminant Analysis Approach

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Documented evidence has raised public and professional concern regarding the prevalence of victimisation in schools and the established immediate and long-term adverse consequences it has on many aspects of the development of adolescents. The purpose of our research was a) to examine the frequency of self-reported victimisation b) to investigate the victimisation coping strategies c) to examine possible gender and age effects and d) to identify differences between bullied and non-bullied students with regard to coping strategies and school belongingness. Eight hundred sixty students (860), aged 12 to 16, from 15 public secondary schools of Greece participated in the study. Gender proved a stronger differentiating factor than age in reporting being victimised, in coping with victimisation and in perceived school belongingness. Being a boy and feeling rejected in school puts individuals at high risk for being victimised. These results are in line with ecological approaches to school bullying phenomena.

## 1. Introduction

There has been growing interest lately, in the study of victimisation among adolescent students in Greece and elsewhere with a view to improving school policies concerning anti-bullying practices (Athanasiades & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2010; Skrzypiec, Slee, Roussi-Vergou & Andreou, 2013). Documented evidence has raised public and professional concern (Craig et al., 2009; Psalti, 2012) regarding the prevalence of victimisation in schools and the established immediate and long-term adverse consequences it has on many aspects of the development of adolescents (Erentaite, Bergman & Zukauskienė, 2012; Skapinakis et al., 2011; Undheim & Sund, 2010). Despite variations across educational systems, data from cross-national studies that include Greece (Craig et al., 2009) suggests that on average 12.6% of students between the

ages of 11 to 15 reported having been persistently victimised. However, despite the alarming extent of victimisation among Greek adolescent students, to date, institutions and staff remain predominantly unprepared for and lacking in the professional knowledge needed to implement preventive school-wide policies and evidence-based practices for dealing with this particular problem (Didaskalou, Roussi-Vergou & Andreou, 2015). Accordingly, students in secondary education report being ignorant of what they should do to avoid torment by peers and unsure about whether their schools have any formal procedures in place for reporting and dealing with incidents of harassment (Skrzypiec et al., 2013).

Recent understandings of the problem of victimisation among adolescent students have influenced the direction of research and the theoretical underpinning of evidence-based school practices aimed at counteracting such persecution. This new perspective extends beyond an analysis of the individual characteristics of those being directly harassed by others, towards a more ecologic approach to victimisation, as a complex social process that develops within the peer-group context and is significantly influenced by the dominant social norms within the group (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi & Franzoni, 2008; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Accordingly, much of the most recent research in this field has focused on the exploration of various individual and school-related determinants that may contribute to inner-group experiences of victimisation and harassment (Bacchini, Esposito & Affuso, 2008; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

In reviewing the pertinent literature, the individual variables of students' gender and age have been extensively analysed and their relation to the extent and kind of victimisation that adolescent students might experience has been documented. Further, the distinct coping mechanisms that students utilise in dealing with bullying from their peers together with their perceived degree of belonging within the school community have been found to be powerfully related to the genesis and the extent of their victimisation and should, therefore, be central to any analysis of this particular problem. It is within this framework that the present study aims to present a comprehensive view of the multifaceted problem of victimisation among students, by identifying and analysing some of its core determinants and dynamics and adding to pertinent research on developing effective educational responses for its elimination. More specifically, it gives an account of the victimisation experiences of Greek secondary school students, details school perceptions and coping mechanisms and addresses their implications in the development of preventive anti-bullying interventions and policies.

### **Individual and school related determinants of victimisation**

Regarding some of the individual determinants of victimisation, gender variance has been identified in the overall prevalence and types of victimisation experienced by male and female adolescent students, and mounting evidence exists in Greece and elsewhere which indicates that males are more likely than females to be a victim of

bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer & O'Brennan, 2009; Craig, Pepler & Blais, 2007; Didaskalou et al., 2015). For both males and females, being teased and/or called names have been identified as the most frequently reported types of peer altercations (Didaskalou et al., 2015; Skrzypiec, Slee, Murray-Harvey & Pereira, 2011). Nonetheless, documented evidence indicates that overt physical or verbal aggression directed at males by peers is more common among male students than their female contemporaries; on the other hand, it is more common for female students to experience relational harassment by their schoolmates (Athanasiaades & Deliyanni-Kouimtzi, 2010; Owens, Slee & Shute, 2000; Undheim & Sund, 2010).

With respect to developmental variances, the prevalence of all traditional types of victimisation among adolescent students has been found to follow a declining path with increasing age, irrespective of gender (Frisen, Jonsson & Persson, 2007; Lester, Cross, Shaw & Dooley, 2012; Sapouna, 2008). Within this context of age-related discrepancies, however, there seems to be converging evidence from different educational systems about a clearly marked temporary rise in victimisation amongst pre-adolescents during their transition from primary to middle or high school (Lester et al., 2012; Mooij, 2005; Sapouna, 2008). As far as the developmental balance between direct and indirect forms of victimisation is concerned, differences were revealed on examination of the evidence collected in Greece and elsewhere. In addition to the individual-related variables mentioned above, researchers have recently focused on investigating the relationships between the extent of students' victimisation and the distinct mechanisms that they themselves employ for coping with this particular problem. More specifically, evidence exists indicating that the kinds of strategies that students use to terminate bullying are related to the extent of the harassment that they experience from peers. In other words, ineffective coping is likely to contribute to expanding victimisation (Kanetsuna, Smith & Morita, 2006; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010; Skrzypiec et al., 2011; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor & Chauhan, 2004). Existing research evidence on coping clearly indicates that there are both productive and non-productive ways for dealing with problems of aggression from peers.

In particular, the approaches termed problem-focused or approach oriented have been found to correlate with a diminished likelihood of repeated victimisation and include strategies such as looking for social backing or opting to respond through an alternate way of acting (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By contrast, avoidant or emotional oriented approaches which encompass strategies such as denying the existence of an incident, externalising coping (e.g. cursing at someone) or crying and running away are more likely to add to expanding the extension of victimisation over time. The distinction, nonetheless, between the two general categories mentioned above, is not clear-cut. Neither does any strategy exist that has been found to be effective with any type of victimisation or in any given circumstance (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Hence, students might often utilise a combination of approaches for handling harassment from peers and these appear to be closely related to their gender, age, bully-victim status and perceived a sense of belonging at school.

In fact, it is more common for young students who are being victimised to rely on being avoidant, as is the case with bully/victims who employ externalising responses, when compared with the rest of their schoolmates (Kristensen & Smith, 2003). Yet, evidence exists indicating that the students who are bullied in multiple ways tend more often to utilise counterproductive strategies for dealing with harassment by peers, than those who are victimised in one way only (Skrzypiec et al., 2011). Further, female adolescents typically rely on problem-focused recommended approaches, in contrast with their male associates (Krsistensen & Smith, 2003).

Recently, the research focus in this field has expanded beyond the individual variables cited above, towards an analysis of those critical school related predictors of bullying behaviour (Bacchini et al., 2008; Kasen, Berenson, Cohen & Johnson, 2004). Accumulated research evidence points to a strong relationship between student perceptions of school climate and their involvement in bullying behaviours, either as a perpetrator or a victim of peer aggressiveness (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Eisenberg, Neaumarck-Sztainer & Perry, 2003; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Rigby & Slee, 1993). A positive school climate is likely to serve as a buffer that mitigates wider adverse societal influences and institutional attitudes which favour violence and foster harassment among peers (Goldweber, Waasdrop & Bradshaw, 2013). In fact, it has been documented that there is a greater risk for those students who perceive their school climate negatively and as being less supportive, to get engaged in aggressive interactions with peers, when compared to the rest of their schoolmates, who hold more positive school perceptions (Goldweber et al., 2013; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011).

The perceived sense of belonging felt by young students at school constitutes a core dimension of the multifaceted construct of the school climate and is strongly correlated with their academic outcomes and well-being. The level of belonging at school felt by students has been found to be strongly associated with their involvement in bullying problems (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Smith & Shu, 2000). More specifically, a weakened sense of belonging at school has been found to contribute to an increased likelihood of victimisation. Accordingly, the students who are constantly bullied, along with those self-identified as bully/victims, typically report feeling less attached to their schools and holding more negative perceptions about their teachers when contrasted to their peers who are not involved in bullying problems (Goldweber et al., 2013; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011).

Further, student perceptions about their school have been found to be associated with the distinct coping mechanisms that they themselves employ for dealing with peer victimisation (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Eliot, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2010). In particular, it has been documented that students' perceptions of a supportive school climate are powerfully associated with their willingness to seek social support for dealing with harassment from their peers (Eliot et al., 2010). Seeking social support, both from adults and peers, in order to counteract victimisation has been identified as a highly recommended tactic by teachers and a core element in many anti-bullying

school-based programmes (Nikolaides, Toda & Smith, 2002; Skrzypiec et al., 2011; Skrzypiec et al., 2013). The students who have positive views about their teachers and a sense of belonging to their school are more likely to endorse positive attitudes towards asking for their teachers' help when encountering a threatening situation among peers, than those who hold negative school perceptions.

Within the conceptual and research framework outlined above, we set out to: a) examine the frequency of self-reported victimisation among secondary school students, b) investigate the coping strategies employed by students when confronted with school bullying, c) examine whether victimisation, coping strategies and school belongingness are differentiated by the gender and age of students and d) identify differences between bullied and non-bullied students with regard to coping strategies and school belongingness.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Eight hundred sixty students (860), 435 boys and 425 girls (51% and 49% of the participants respectively), from 15 secondary public schools in central Greece participated in the study. The schools were "typical" Greek secondary schools and the principals volunteered to participate in the study. The method was a whole classroom approach. Schools were randomly selected according to a research procedure that had been submitted to the Ministry of Education and received official consensus, as completely complying with ethics. Participants' age ranged from 12 to 16, as shown in Table 1. Age "13" over-represented in the sample, but no gender distribution differences were found among children of the same age.

**Table 1. Distribution of the participants according to age and gender**

Gender	Age (in years)						Total
	12	13	14	15	16	17	
Boys	70 (16.1)	166 (38.2%)	112 (25.7%)	66 (15.2%)	14 (3.2%)	5 (1.1%)	435 (100%)
Girls	53 (12.5%)	172 (40.5%)	115 (27.1%)	67 (15.8%)	17 (4%)	0 (0%)	425 (100%)
Total	123 (14.3%)	338 (39.3%)	227 (26.4%)	133 (15.5%)	31 (3.6%)	5 (0.6%)	860 (100%)

### 2.2. Measures

*2.2.1. Exposure to Victimisation:* The frequency of victimisation was directly located by asking the students the question: "Over the last term, how often have you been bullied or harassed by a student or students at this high school?" Students had to

choose between “1=every day”, “2=most days of the week”, “3=one or two days a week”, “4=about once a week”, “5=less than once a week” and “6=never”.

2.2.2. *Coping Strategies*: The “Living and learning at school: Bullying at school” questionnaire (Skrzypiec et al., 2011) was administered where coping with bullying strategies were measured in two different sections in the questionnaire. “What would you usually do if you were being bullied or harassed?” was followed by 14 items, specifying several “approach” and “avoidance” coping strategies used by students to deal with bullying such as “tell a teacher”, “ask friends for help” or “cry”, and respondents were given a four-scale answer, ranging from “never” to “very often”. The next one, “Would you use, or have you used, the following strategies to deal with your concerns or worries about bullying?” was followed by 29 specific to bullying coping strategies, on a five-scale answer, ranging from “never use it” to “use it a great deal”.

2.2.3. *School belongingness* was assessed by the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM Scale), (Goodnow, 1993). The PSSM scale is 18-item self-report inventory designed to measure youths’ perceptions of belonging and psychological engagement in school. The respondents were asked to indicate on a 4-point Likert scale their level of agreement with the content of each item. The scoring of the scale ranges from 0 to 72, with higher scores indicating students’ perceptions of a more positive school climate and higher levels of psychological engagement. As shown by You, Ritchey, Furlong, Shochet and Boman (2010) PSSM is a multidimensional instrument, measuring *caring relationships* (7 items), *acceptance* (6 items) and *rejection* (5 items). Internal consistency of each subscale was satisfactory according to Cronbach alpha which was calculated to .80, .75 and .65 respectively. In order to achieve a total score on the PSSM, the items of rejection have to be reversed.

### 3. Results

3.1. *Being bullied frequency*: Concerning our 1st research question, the frequency of the self-reported victimisation among secondary students, according to 849 participants who responded, 1.5% students reported being victimised *every day*, 2.8% *most days of the week*, 2.1% *one or two days a week*, 2.9% *about once a week*, 22.6% *less than once a week* and 68.1% reported *never* have been victimised.

Those responses were further grouped into three categories, the “serious bullied group” (bullied at least once a week), the “moderately bullied group” (bullied less than once a week) and the “safe group” (never being victimised). Under this grouping perspective, 9.3% of the children are being seriously victimised, 22.6% moderately and 68.1% reported safe from being bullied.

3.2. *Coping*: The 2nd research question was relevant to the coping strategies that children employ when confronted with school bullying.

An exploratory factor analysis was used to group the 43 items of different ways of coping, into fewer categories. Principal component factor analysis was conducted

on the with varimax rotation. The Keiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .89 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant  $\chi^2 = 12168.33$  (df = 903) ( $p < 0.001$ ) (a prerequisite for factor analysis).

An initial analysis was run to obtain eigenvalues for each factor in the data. Ten factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 and in combination explained 56.25% of the variance. The scree plot was moderately ambiguous, but beyond the 10th factor the line became more horizontal. According to items clustering, the factors represent:

Factor 1: **Adult support seeking/turn to others** was represented by items such as, *ask the teacher for help with bullying, tell a teacher, or use the school's anti-harassment/bullying procedures to deal with the bullying*. The 1st factor explained the 14.72% of the total variance. These coping behaviours represent a more active and "approach" kind of coping strategies, based on seeking help and support from others, mainly adults. Factor 2: **Emotional coping/keep away from school** was the second factor opposed to the first one (as varimax rotation dictates). The second factor explained 7.85% of the total variance and includes emotional reactions as *crying, looking unhappy, or staying away from school to avoid bullying*. These behaviours are more close to the "avoidance" coping, resulting more often in behaviours such as staying away from school. Factor 3: **Keeping healthy and fit** was the third factor that explained the 4.91% of the variance, and includes behaviours that foster a positive attitude to the problem, such as *trying to be cheerful despite the problem, finding ways to relax* along with new ways to rethinking about the problem and keeping fit and healthy. Factor 4: **Positive attitude towards the bully** is represented by items that reflect a positive and friendly attitude towards the bully, such as *improving the relationship with the bullying or trying to make friends*. It explained the 4.89% of the total variance. Factor 5: **Peer support seeking**, is quite similar to the first factor regarding turning to others for help behaviours, but in this case the "others" are mainly peers. This factor is clustered by items such as, *ask friends for help, or ask a friend to tell the bully to stop what they are doing*. It explained the 4.67% of the total variance. Factor 6: **Emotional outbursts**. This factor includes acting-out behaviours, such as *taking one's feelings out on others or doing things that others wouldn't like me to do*. It explained the 4.38% of the total variance. Factor 7: **Wishful thinking and self-blame**, it consists of behaviours of hoping and wishing that the bullying will stop, along with finding oneself as being at fault. It explained the 4.32% of the variance. Factor 8: The "**If as not is happening**" behaviours consist the eighth factor which explained the 4.07% of the total variance, and consisted of behaviours as *ignoring the bullies, pretending it was not happening or give in to bullies*. Factor 9: **Assertive behaviours**. The ninth factor represents more active coping approach, such as sticking up for oneself, fighting back or getting angry. It explained the 3.42% of the total variance. Factor 10: **Get away from the bullies**. This is actually not a factor but a single item that loaded on the tenth factor. It explained the 3.03% of the total variance and represents the getting away from the bully coping.

3.3. *Gender and age differences in victimisation, coping strategies and school belongingness:* The 3rd aim was to examine whether victimisation, coping strategies and school belongingness are differentiated by students' gender and age.

*Victimisation:* There was a significant association between victimisation and gender, as calculated by Pearson's chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) (likelihood ratio). As shown in Table 2, the boys surpass the number of girls in the seriously bullied category ( $\chi^2 = 15.32$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The odds of being a boy into the seriously bullied categories are almost 2 times higher than being a girl. Age \* bullied effect was also tested by Pearson's chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) (likelihood ratio). No age differences at in the levels of victimisation were found among children of 12 to 16 years old.

**Table 2. Gender \* levels of reported victimisation**

		<i>Levels of victimisation</i>				
			<i>Seriously</i>	<i>Moderately</i>	<i>Non-bullied</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Gender</b>	<i>boy</i>	N	53	109	269	431
		%	12.3%	25.3%	62.4%	100%
	<i>girl</i>	N	26	83	309	418
		%	6.2%	19.9%	73.9%	100%
<b>Total</b>		N	79	192	578	849
		%	9.3%	22.6%	68.1%	100%

*School belongingness:* Non-parametric statistics were calculated to detect possible differences due to age or gender effect, as the frequency distributions of the school belongingness subscales were rather skewed. According to Mann-Whitney U, levels of school belongingness slightly differed (as shown by the effect sizes) among boys and girls, apparent only in the dimension of affection. Specifically, *affection* levels in girls ( $Mdn = 439.96$ ) were significantly higher compared to affection in boys ( $Mdn = 387.04$ )  $U=74,354.50$   $z = -3.192$ ,  $p<.001$ . Effect size  $r$  was calculated at  $-.12$ , which is a rather small one (see Field, 2013) as an effect size well above the  $|.5|$  threshold is considered large. *Acceptance* levels in boys ( $Mdn = 397.28$ ), although lower, didn't differ significantly from those in girls ( $Mdn = 426.68$ ),  $U=74,354.50$   $z = -3.192$ ,  $p=.075$ ,  $r = -.07$ . Finally, *rejection* levels also in boys ( $Mdn = 426.79$ ), although higher, didn't differ significantly from those in girls ( $Mdn = 399.24$ ),  $U=79,396.0$   $z = -1.67$ ,  $p=.095$   $r = -.06$ .

Concerning the age effects on school belonging perceptions, they seem to decline as children grow up. Kruskal – Wallis test (H) was performed as we had to compare more than two groups. Affection and acceptance seem to decrease by age, whereas rejection increases. Older children experience less affection,  $H(4) = 9.0$ ,  $p=.06$  and acceptance  $H(4) = 14.51$ ,  $p=.006$ , whereas rejection (although increase) didn't differ significantly  $H(4) = 1.95$ ,  $p=.74$ .

*Coping:* MANOVA was used to calculate the overall differences of coping approaches among different gender and age groups. According to Wilks' lambda, there was a

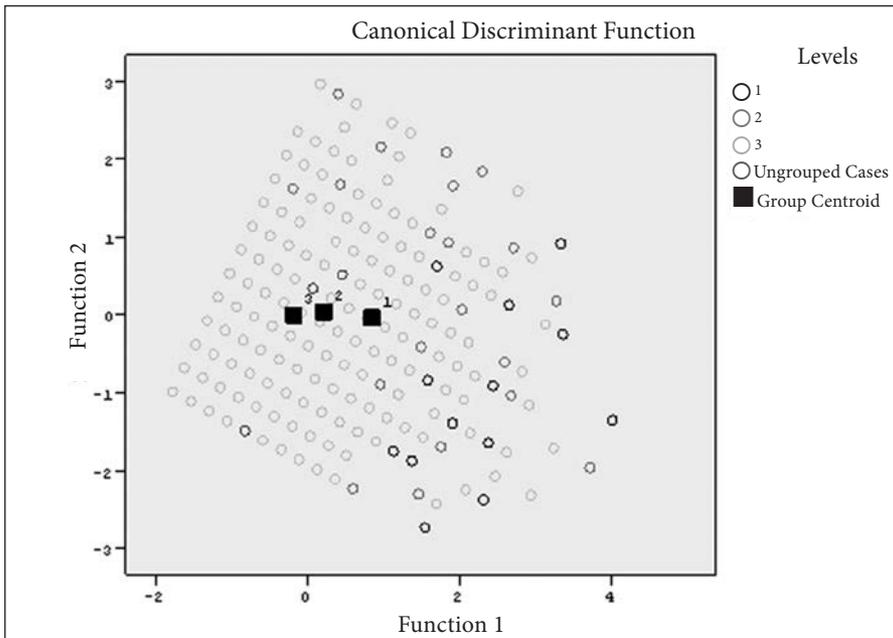
medium and significant effect of gender on the coping strategies  $\Lambda = .829$ ,  $F(10, 788) = 16.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .171$ .

Girls scored higher than boys almost in all coping factors, and according to ANOVA analysis, girls more often than boys resort mainly to emotional coping  $F(1,840) = 108.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , seek more often for adult help  $F(1,825) = 75.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , try to keep healthy and fit  $F(1,840) = 15.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , resort more often to wishful thinking and self-blame  $F(1,839) = 9.49$ ,  $p < .005$ , run away  $F(1,840) = 7.47$ ,  $p < .01$  and seek peer support  $F(1,838) = 6.51$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Wilks' lambda was also used to test the hypotheses of a significant effect of age on the coping strategies, which was not rejected. According to MANOVA results, age effects were also found for the coping strategies,  $\Lambda = .895$ ,  $F(40, 2951.94) = 2.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .027$ .

According to ANOVA analysis for the sources of these effects, older children seem to seek less adult help  $F(4,822) = 6.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , tend to express more emotional outbursts  $F(4,837) = 4.50$ ,  $p < .001$ , seek less peer support  $F(4,835) = 3.82$ ,  $p < .005$ , and employ less wishful thinking  $F(4.836) = 3.36$ ,  $p < .05$ .

*3.4. Bullied and non-bullied children differences:* Finally, our last, 4th aim was to identify the differences between bullied and non-bullied students in both coping strategies and school belongingness. Discriminant analysis (stepwise method) was employed in order to investigate how we can best separate the bullied from the non-bullied children according to the coping strategies and the belongingness experiences.



**Figure 1.** Group centroids of the three victimisation categories (1: seriously bullied, 2: moderately bullied, 3: non-bullied)

In the discriminant analysis a two discriminant functions were revealed. The first explained the 99.5% of the variance, canonical  $R^2 = .09$ , whereas the second explained only the 0.5%, canonical  $R^2 = .001$ . In combination these discriminant functions differentiated significantly the bullied groups,  $\Lambda = .915$ ,  $\chi^2(4) = 67.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , but removing the first function indicated that the second function did not significantly differentiate the groups  $\Lambda = .999$ ,  $\chi^2(1) = .38$ ,  $p = .54$ . The correlations between outcomes and the discriminant functions revealed that **rejection** loaded highly onto first function ( $r = .90$ ) and negatively relatively high onto the second function ( $r = -.44$ ). **Coping mechanisms “as if it not happened”**, loaded on the first function ( $r = .46$ ) and also very high onto the second function ( $r = .88$ ). According to these findings strong discriminative value for the bullied and non-bullied children has the **rejection** along with coping behaviours such as ignore the bullies, pretend it was not happening, avoid thinking about it or give in to the bullies, whereas the same coping strategy but without rejection seems to differentiate the moderately bullied children. So, we can assume that is not the coping but the rejection that is strongly related to bullying.

As seen in Figure 1 the group centroids of the three victimisation categories, are shown as squares. The graph tells us that variate 1 (horizontal distance between the centroids) discriminates the group 1 (the seriously bullied children) from the group 3 (the non-bullied children). The second variate differentiates the second group (the moderately bullied), but this difference is not as dramatic as for the first variance.

## 4. Discussion

Our study of secondary school students aimed a) to examine the frequency of self-reported victimisation, b) to investigate the coping with bullying strategies, c) to examine whether victimisation, coping strategies and school belongingness are differentiated by the gender and age of students and finally d) to identify differences between bullied and non-bullied students with regard to coping strategies and school belongingness.

Concerning the frequency of victimisation, we found that about 1 out of 10 children is being seriously bullied at school (every week) whereas 2 out of 10 moderately bullied. Concerning the long-term adverse consequences that bullying has on many aspects of the development of adolescents, this victimisation rate remains extremely high and (unfortunately) consistent with previous findings (Athanasiaides & Deliyanni-Kouimtzi, 2010; Craig et al., 2009).

Coping strategies were investigated by an exploratory factor analysis. Adult support seeking/turn to others was the clearest pattern which was identified, followed by emotional coping and keeping away from school. Keeping fit and healthy, positive attitude towards the bully, peer support seeking, emotional outbursts, wishful thinking and self-blame, pretend as if it is not happening and assertive behaviours, were other patterns of bullying coping with less internal consistency. From this clustering is apparent the distinction of approach/avoidance dimensions as proposed by Lazarus

and Folkman (1984) and also the distinction problem-focused as opposed to emotion-focused (Lazarus, 1999). The following table presents our proposed classification of the victimisation coping along two dimensions, function and movement. Function has to do with the dominant activity, driven by emotion or thinking, in other words, intentional and purposeful behaviours. The movement dimension has to do with approach or avoidance to the problem. Of course, the distinction is indicative and not clear-cut.

	Function	
Movement	Emotion	Thinking / Problem - solving
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• positive attitude towards the bully</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adult support seeking / turn to others</li> <li>• keeping fit and healthy</li> <li>• peer support seeking</li> <li>• assertive behaviours</li> </ul>
Avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emotional coping and keeping away from school</li> <li>• emotional outbursts</li> <li>• get away from bullies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wishful thinking and self-blame</li> <li>• pretend as if it is not happening</li> </ul>

There was a significant association between victimisation and gender, where boys seem to report being victimised as twice as girls. This finding is consistent with other findings were reported that men are more likely than women to be a victim of bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer & O’ Brennan, 2009; Didaskalou et al., 2015).

No age variations in victimisation were found in the age range 12–16, contrary to other evidence that showed that victimisation among adolescent follows a declining path with the increase of age, irrespective of gender (Frisen, Jonsson & Persson, 2007; Lester, Cross, Shaw & Dooley, 2012; Sapouna, 2008). One possible explanation could be that children in secondary education (age 12–16) share more common characteristics in a period that lies between two transitional periods, the one from primary to middle school and the next one to come from middle to high school (Mooij, 2005; Sapouna, 2008).

Gender was also proved a stronger differentiating factor than age, both in coping and school belongingness. As such, slight gender differences were found in the school belongingness, and only in the dimension of affection, where girls reported more feelings of respect than boys. On victimisation coping, girls scored systematically higher than boys in all factors, especially in emotional coping.

What was particularly interesting, is the finding that school belonging decreases by age. This could be due to maturation effect, where other environments become as important to teenagers, or due to general Greek school policy’s failure to develop conditions which can further foster student’s feelings of belonging in older ages. Data from previous research (Didaskalou, Roussi-Vergou & Andreou, 2015; Skrzypiec et al., 2013) which revealed serious deficits in Greek schools’ antibullying

policies, makes us more skeptical of the first explanation. Coping also decreases by age, as older children seem to seek less adult help, express more emotional outbursts, seek less peer support and employ less wishful thinking. From this research is not clear if those age differences in coping are quantitative or qualitative in nature.

Finally, findings by the comparisons between bullied and non-bullied students on victimisation coping and belongingness can be better explained by a more ecologic approach. Bullied from non-bullied children do not differ as much in coping, as in feelings of being rejected in school. This finding is consistent with previous research that showed that victimisation is a complex social process that develops within the peer-group context and is significantly influenced by the dominant social norms within the group (Gini et al., 2008; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Ineffective coping was not emerged as an important factor compared to belongingness, contrary to the importance that has been given to coping by researchers (Kanetsuna et al., 2006; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010; Skrzypiec et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2004).

To conclude, being a boy and feeling rejected in school puts individuals in high-risk category for victimisation. This finding is in accordance with accumulated research evidence which points to a strong relationship between student perceptions of school climate and their involvement in bullying behaviours, either as a perpetrator or a victim of peer aggressiveness (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Rigby & Slee, 1993). We agree with the view that a positive school climate is likely to serve as a buffer that mitigates wider adverse societal influences and institutional attitudes which favor violence and harassment among peers (Goldweber et al., 2013). Schools must develop strategies and act proactively so as peer-rejection phenomena not to escalate, or even better, to protect children communities from developing them in the first place.

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