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# Forgiveness as a protector of psychological adjustment in school bullying

El perdón como protector del ajuste psicológico en acoso escolar

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Literature has consistently found that forgiveness has a therapeutic effect on victims. However, the effects on adolescents, specifically in cases of bullying, are unknown. A field study was designed with the aim of determining the prevalence of levels of forgiveness in the adolescent population and the moderating effect of forgiveness on mental health in cases of bullying.

**Method:** A total of 400 adolescents, 56.8% girls and 43.3% boys, aged between 14 and 16 years ( $M = 15.15$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) completed measures of forgiveness, psychological adjustment and bullying victimization.

**Results:** The results classified 37.7% of adolescents as having a low level of forgiveness, a significant association between gender and level of forgiveness (boys were classified more often as having a high level of forgiveness) and scored significantly higher on forgiveness than girls. Furthermore, the results showed that forgiveness acts as a protective factor, mitigating the adverse effects on psychological adjustment associated with bullying victimization.

**Conclusions:** The findings reinforced the forgiveness role as a protective factor in mental health against victimization by bullying during adolescence. Therefore, incorporation of forgiveness into prevention and intervention programmes in the educational field is advocated. Future research should further explore the relationship between these variables, as well as evaluate the psychoeducational effectiveness programmes focused on promoting forgiveness at an early age.

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**Keywords:** Adverse outcomes, Adolescents, Victimization, Moderating effects, Therapeutic effect.

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## Resumen

**Introducción:** La literatura ha encontrado de forma sistemática que el perdón desempeña un efecto terapéutico en las víctimas. Sin embargo, se desconocen los efectos en adolescentes, específicamente en acoso escolar. Se diseñó un estudio de campo con el objetivo de conocer la prevalencia de niveles de perdón en población adolescente y el efecto de moderador del perdón en la salud mental en acoso escolar.

**Método:** Un total de 400 adolescentes, 56.8% chicas y 43.3% chicos, con un rango de edad entre los 14 y 16 años ( $M = 15.15$ ,  $DT = .68$ ) respondieron a una medida de perdón, del ajuste psicológico y la victimización de acoso escolar.

**Resultados:** Los resultados clasificaron al 37.7% de adolescentes en el nivel bajo de perdón, una asociación significativa entre género y nivel de perdón (los chicos fueron clasificados más en el nivel alto de perdón), y puntuaron significativamente más en perdón que las chicas. Además, los resultados mostraron que el perdón actúa como un factor de protección, atenuando los efectos adversos en el ajuste psicológico asociados a la victimización de acoso escolar.

**Conclusiones:** Los hallazgos reforzaron el papel del perdón como factor protector en la salud mental frente a la victimización por acoso escolar durante la adolescencia. Por ende, se propone la incorporación del perdón en programas de prevención e intervención en el ámbito educativo. Futuras investigaciones deberían profundizar en la relación de estas variables, así como también evaluar la eficacia de programas psicoeducativos centrados en el fomento del perdón en edades tempranas.

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**Palabras clave:** Efectos adversos, Adolescentes, Victimización, Efectos de moderación, Efectos terapéuticos.

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## Introduction

The study of forgiveness was strongly rooted in religious and philosophical domains, with evidence of its origins found in most of the world's major religions (i.e., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam) (Enright et al., 1992; Fariña, Novo et al., 2024; Fariña, Zhao et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022). In Philosophy, thinkers such as Aristotle and Seneca reflected on the meaning of forgiveness, recognizing its relevance in individuals' moral and social lives. Aristotle viewed forgiveness as a balanced attitude toward offense, while Seneca, from a Stoic perspective, defined it as a path to inner freedom and moral strength. Traditionally, forgiveness has been understood as an act of compassion, mercy, and liberation for both the forgiver and the forgiven (McCullough et al., 2000). This suggests that forgiveness is not only an ethical principle but also a spiritual one (Rye, 2005).

Psychology's interest in the forgiveness study began to emerge strongly during the 1980s and 1990s (Gao et al., 2022), within the context of research on moral development (Kohlberg, 1984). During this period, forgiveness was defined in multiple ways (Papadopoulou et al., 2017), with notable approaches emphasizing cognitive factors (Thompson et al., 2005), emotional factors (Worthington & Wade, 1999), motivational factors (McCullough, 2000), or a confluence of these dimensions (Enright & Coyle, 1998). Nevertheless, there is consensus that forgiveness is not equivalent to reconciliation or excusing the offender (Maganto & Garaigordobil, 2010; Song et al., 2025; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010), nor is it merely about accepting what has happened or ceasing to feel anger (González et al., 2021; Fariña et al., 2023; McCullough et al., 2012). Rather, the process of forgiveness involves transforming negative behaviours into positive ones toward the offender (Chen et al., 2019; Fariña & Oyhamburu, 2021; Ma & Jiang, 2020), promoting complex psychological changes that encompass attitudes, emotions, and behaviours (Enright et al., 2000; Forster et al., 2020; González et al., 2021; Schumann & Walton, 2022; Song et al., 2025). As a result, individuals are no longer dominated by resentment and may express compassion, generosity, or even goodwill toward the offender (Suzuki & Jenkins, 2020; Thompson et al., 2005) or retractor of allegations (Li et al., 2023).

Due to its conceptual complexity, the issue of measuring forgiveness has become one of the central challenges in this research line. In recent decades, several self-report instruments have been developed to assess forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Girard & Mullet, 1997; Hargrave & Sells, 1997), and these instruments have been validated in several countries (Enright et al., 2022; Fariña et al., 2023; Gallo-Giunzioni et al., 2021; Rique et al., 2020). These measures typically consider two dispositional dimensions of forgiveness: forgiveness of others (interpersonal dimension) and forgiveness of self (intrapersonal dimension) (Enright, 1996; Subkoviak et al., 1995; Thompson et al., 2005). Although research has shown that individuals also attribute blame to specific situations (e.g., an illness, "fate," or a natural disaster) (Enright & Zell, 1989; Exline et al., 1999; Thompson et al., 2005), most studies do not address forgiveness of situations as a potential source of transgressions—and therefore as a valid target of forgiveness—understood as "situations that violate a person's positive assumptions and lead to negative responses to those situations, meet the aforementioned criteria for transgressions" (Thompson et al., 2005, p. 320). Particularly, Thompson et al. (2005) emphasize that forgiveness does not exclude the possibility of pursuing justice through legal systems or other available mechanisms, if the underlying motivation is not revenge. This consideration is essential when applying the forgiveness process from the perspective of Therapeutic Jurisprudence (Fariña et al., 2021; Fariña & Oyhamburu,

2021; González et al., 2021) and Restorative Justice (Suzuki & Jenkins, 2023). In this regard, in their meta-analytic review, Riek and Mania (2012) examine the forgiveness concept, including different definitions of the construct, various antecedents and consequences of forgiveness, as well as analysing the relationship between forgiveness and a several series of personality and situational variables. Their results show that forgiveness appears to be a multifaceted concept that is influenced by a wide range of factors, distinguishing between personal influences (i.e., personality traits, religiosity), relationship-specific influences, offence-specific influences (i.e., severity, apology), and socio-cognitive influences (i.e., empathy, rumination, attributions).

The benefits of forgiveness are well established (Brady et al., 2023, Novo et al., 2024). Numerous studies support the significant improvements that forgiveness brings to health and psychological well-being (Akhtar & Barlow, 2016; Lampropoulou et al., 2023; Rapp et al., 2022), showing positive associations with self-esteem and self-confidence (Oliveira et al., 2024; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014), as well as life satisfaction and the ability to regulate emotions (León-Moreno et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2017), and serving as a protector against psychological maladjustment (Vilariño et al., 2018, 2022). In support, research has confirmed that depression is negatively correlated with forgiveness (Toussaint et al., 2023), and that individuals who are less forgiving tend to experience higher levels of anger and anxiety (Barcaccia et al., 2018; Kaleta & Mróz, 2023; Tao et al., 2020). Forgiveness constitutes a psychological strength that can promote personal well-being, positive affect, and social support (Fariña, Zhao et al., 2024). Specifically among children and adolescents, the literature indicates that in contexts involving negative experiences, the disposition to forgive (oneself or others) leads to a reduction in the intensity of negative emotions (Flanagan et al., 2012; Peets et al., 2013), such as anger and hostility, lower levels of general anxiety, fewer depressive symptoms, and decreased stress (Freedman, 2018; Wang et al., 2023). Quintana-Orts et al. (2021) examined the role of forgiveness in the context of school bullying, concluding that forgiveness is negatively associated with victimization. Furthermore, empirical evidence remains limited regarding the role of forgiveness in adolescent populations (Marcos, Treskow et al., 2023; Walters & Kim-Spoon, 2014), as well as in various contexts characterized by victimization (e.g., dating violence, sexual harassment) (Gerlsma & Lugtmeyer, 2018; Marcos, Seijo et al., 2023), which are in turn associated with increased internalizing and externalizing mental health problems (Jaskulska et al., 2022; Marcos, Cea et al., 2023; Montes et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in some specific contexts, forgiveness may have social and judicial undesirable effects. Thus, in victims of intimate partner sexual violence, forgiveness is related with dependence and, by extension, the the with draw al of the complaint and the continuing of the relation increasing the probability of revictimization (Arce et al., 2009).

Within this framework, a field study was designed with the aim of determining the forgiveness prevalence levels in the adolescent population and the moderating effect of forgiveness on mental health in school bullying. Thus, forgiveness process in its three dimensions (for oneself, for others, for situations) is examined among adolescent peers, bearing in mind the presence/absence of victimization by school bullying. In turn, the protective role of forgiveness between victimization and psychological well-being is analysed, as well as the differences in the forgiveness process according to the gender variable.

# Method

## Participants

A full of 400 Spanish adolescents participated in the study, 56.8% girls ( $n = 227$ ) and 43.3% boys ( $n = 173$ ), aged between 14 and 16 years old ( $M = 15.15$ ,  $SD = .68$ ). Regarding the academic year, 30.5% were in 3rd of Compulsory education (14-15 years) and 49.0% in 4th of Compulsory education (15-16 years), while 19.5% were in 1st of Bacca-laureate (16-17 years), .5% in 2nd of Bacca-laureate (17-18 years) and the remaining .5% in Formative Cycles. Regarding the type of secondary school, 73.0% were to a public school, 22.5% in a state-subsidised school and 4.5% in a private school (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Characteristics of the research sample*

		N	%
Gender	Girls	227	56.80
	Boys	173	43.30
Academic year	3rd of Compulsory education	122	30.50
	4th of Compulsory education	196	49.00
	1st of Bacca-laureate	78	19.50
	2nd of Bacca-laureate	2	.50
	Formative Cycles	2	.50
Type of secondary school	Public school	292	73.00
	State-subsidised school	90	22.50
	Private school	18	4.50
		Mean (SD)	
Age		15.15 ( .68)	

## Procedure

The present investigation is framed within a quasi-experimental study design of comparative groups, with a matching of the groups according to the variable of bullying victimization (absence vs. presence). For the diagnosis of bullying victimization, diagnostic criteria were followed (i.e., violence, intentionality, repetition, power asymmetry, victimization), which facilitate the differential diagnosis of bullying with other types of aggressive and/or violent behaviours that occur among the peer group (e.g., conflicts, school phobia, fights, bullying, etc.), conflicts, school phobia, physical fights) (Arce et al., 2014; Marcos et al., 2024), being applicable cyberbullying too (Arce et al., 2014; Olweus & Limber, 2018).

To facilitate comparison between groups, control for bias arising from sample size imbalance, and reduce the likelihood that the observed differences were due to factors unrelated to victimization, 200 adolescents who reported having been victims of bullying and 200 adolescents who were not victims of bullying were selected from the initial 694 participants. The latter group was selected by simple random sampling from the group of non-victims.

To obtain the sample, authorization with the secondary school, the permission of the parents and the consent of the participants were processed. The instruments were managed by experienced and trained researchers and in a single session.

This study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela (Code: USC54/2022). Data were gathered and stored in compliance with the Spanish Data Protection Law (Ley Orgánica 3/2018, de 5 de diciembre, de Protección de Datos Personales y Garantía de los Derechos Digitales, 2018).

## Measure instruments

An *ad hoc* socio-demographic questionnaire was designed: gender, age, academic year (3rd of Compulsory education, 4th of Compulsory education, 1st of Baccalaureate, 2nd of Baccalaureate, Formative Cycles) and type of school (public, state-subsidized and private school).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005) was used. This instrument is a self-report measure of dispositional forgiveness (with subscales to assess Forgiveness of Self, Others, and Situations) (i.e., "I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me", "I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done", "It's really hard for me to accept negative situations that aren't anybody's fault"). It consists of 18 items, with a format scale on 7 points ranging from *Almost Always False of Me* (1) to *Almost Always True of Me* (7). This scale presented a total scale internal consistency of .86, as well as good psychometric properties in all factors ( $\alpha = .75$  for Forgiveness of self,  $\alpha = .78$  for Forgiveness of others and  $\alpha = .79$  for Forgiveness of situations). In this research, it obtained a reliability index of .78 for the total scale. A score of 18 to 54 classifies the protocol as unforgiving of oneself, others, and uncontrollable situations; a score ranging from 55 to 89 as likely to forgive as not forgive (in this study, these two groups were coded as low forgiveness); and a score from 90 to 126 as forgiving of oneself, others, and uncontrollable situations.

As for the assessment of psychological adjustment, the Sistema de Evaluación de Niños y Adolescentes [Assessment System for Children and Adolescents] (Fernández-Pinto et al., 2015) was administered. This scale consists of 188 items, structured in 3 measures: mental health problems, vulnerability and personal resources. The response scale is in a 5-point Likert type: *Never* (1), *Rarely* (2), *Sometimes* (3), *Often* (4), and *Always* (5). Within this study, the measurement of mental health problems were used. In the present study, the internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha, for psychological adjustment was .86.

Escala de Acoso Escolar [Bullying Scale] (Arce et al., 2014) was used. It is a self-report measure designed under the differential criteria of bullying from other anti-normative behaviour that occur in the school context, composed of 26 items (e.g., "They insult me, call me nasty names", "They take things and/or money from me", "They leave me out of activities or games", "They ridicule my opinions, tastes or preferences"). It is divided into four factors (i.e., psychological, physical, exclusion, relational), on a 5-point Likert-type scale for frequency (1 = *Never or rarely happens to me*; 2 = *Once a month*; 3 =

*Two or three times a month; 4 = Once a week; 5 = Several times a week*), and 4 points for duration of bullying behaviour (1 = 1 month; 2 = 3 months; 3 = 6 months; 4 = More than 6 months). This scale was reliable (Arce et al., 2014),  $\alpha = .95$ , for the diagnosis of bullying victimization (rule of thumb = .95; Nunnally, 1978). The scale presented, with the participants in this study, a good reliability (internal consistency) for basic research,  $\alpha = .90$  (Nunnally, 1978).

## Data analysis

Descriptive analysis and frequency analysis of the variables under study were performed. To estimate the levels of forgiveness, the scale factors were scored, and the total value was dichotomized (high vs. low).

Regard to examine bullying victimization, the criteria for the diagnosis of bullying were followed, dichotomizing this variable (absence vs. presence). The association between variables was estimated with Fisher exact test, and two-sample *t*-test to study mean differences. The effect size was calculated using Cohen's *d*, whose parameters are set between .20 (small), .50 (medium) and .80 (large) (Cohen, 1988), and the statistical error model with the Probability of an Inferiority Score (PIS; Vilariño et al., 2022): a estimation of the probability in the higher score group of individuals with a score under the mean of the lower score group. To examine bullying victimization, the criteria for the diagnosis of bullying were followed, dichotomizing this variable (absence vs. presence). Pearson correlations were performed to confirm the relationship between the variables under study.

To analyse whether the ability to forgive moderates the relationship between bullying victimization and adolescents' psychological adjustment, a simple moderation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro version 4.2 (Hayes, 2022), installed in IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29) data analysis software. PROCESS Model 1 was used, considering as dependent variable the Global Problem Index of the Sistema de Evaluación de Niños y Adolescentes [Assessment System for Children and Adolescents] (Fernández-Pinto et al., 2015), as predictor variable the experience of bullying victimization assessed through the Escala de Acoso [Bullying Scale] (Arce et al., 2014), and as moderator variable the total score obtained in the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005).

Additionally, the reliability (internal consistency) of the measurement instruments was estimated for the sample of the present study.

## Results

### Forgiveness of self, others and situations

The results showed that 37.7% ( $n = 149$ ), 95% CI [32.5%, 42.0%], of the adolescents were identified as having a low level of forgiveness by the HFS scale (with subscales for self-, other and situation assessment). Specifically on the subscale total scores, means of 26.40 ( $SD = 6.69$ ), 95% CI [25.75, 27.06], for forgiveness of self, 26.69 ( $SD = 6.12$ ), 95% CI [26.09, 27.29], for forgiveness of others, and 24.52 ( $SD = 6.11$ ), 95% CI [23.91, 25.11], for forgiveness of situations, were obtained. A significant association (see Table 2),  $\chi^2(1) = 14.82$ ,  $p < .05$ , was found between gender (boys vs. girls) and forgiveness

process level (low vs. high): 73.4% of boys were classified in the high forgiveness level for 54.6% of girls. In addition, significant differences were found according to gender in the forgiveness process,  $t(398) = 5.40, p < .001$ , showing that boys scored higher ( $M = 81.89, SD = 14.02$ ) than girls ( $M = 74.35, SD = 13.72$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $d = .54$ ). Nevertheless, the error of the statistical model was .295 (PIS = .295) i.e., the probability of boys with lower scores than the mean of girl group is of 29.5%.

Specifically, significant differences were found in self-forgiveness and forgiveness of situations, with boys scoring higher on both factors, with an effect size of  $d = .43$  and  $d = .57$ , respectively. In contrast, no significant gender differences were found in forgiveness of others ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 2**

*Forgiveness process levels by gender*

	Low forgiveness f (%)	High forgiveness f (%)	Total f (%)
Girls	103(45.4%)	124(54.6%)	227(56.8%)
Boys	46(26.6%)	127(73.4%)	173(43.2%)
Total	149(37.3%)	251(62.7%)	400(100%)

## Effects on the forgiveness for the school bullying

Regarding the relationship between forgiveness and victimization, a significant association,  $\chi^2(1) = 34.75, p < .05$ , was observed between forgiveness and victimization (see Table 2), with 103 cases showing low forgiveness and bullying victimization (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Forgiveness process levels by victimization*

	Low forgiveness f (%)	High forgiveness f (%)	Total f (%)
Non victimization	46(11.5%)	154(38.5%)	200(50.0%)
Victimization	46(26.6%)	127(73.4%)	173(43.2%)
Total	149(37.7%)	251(62.7%)	400(100%)

## Relationship between forgiveness, school bullying and psychological well-being

Correlations between the variables under study showed significant relationships (see Table 3), being this inverse and significant relationship between dimensions of forgiveness with bullying victimization and the index of psychological well-being problems (see Table 4).

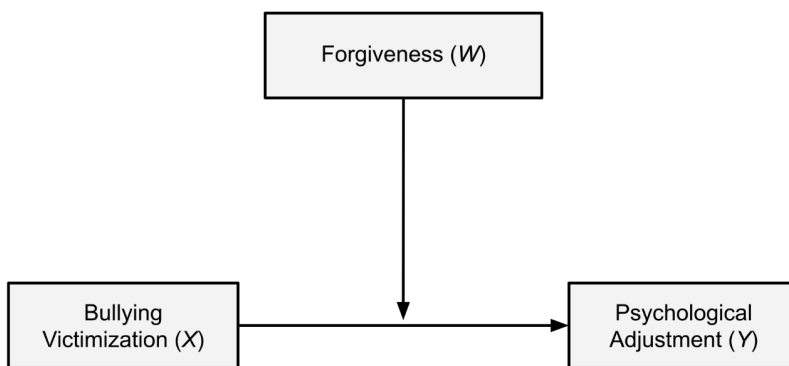
**Table 4***Correlations between forgiveness, school bullying and psychological well-being*

	1	2	3	4
Forgiveness of Self	-			
Forgiveness of Others	.136**	-		
Forgiveness of Situations	.669**	.265**	-	
School bullying	-.336**	-.119*	-.314**	
Psychological well-being	-.617**	-.188**	-.595**	.497**

*Note.* \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Regarding the moderation analysis, the model was significant overall,  $F(3, 396) = 113.22$ ,  $p < .001$ , with an adjusted coefficient of determination of  $R^2 = .462$ . That is, 46.2% of the variance in psychological adjustment is explained by the set of variables included in the analysis. In terms of individual effects, bullying victimization significantly predicted higher levels of psychological problems ( $b = 25.96$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [15.63, 36.28]).

Similarly, forgiveness was negatively associated with such problems, i.e., greater ability to forgive was associated with lower levels of psychological distress ( $b = -.33$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.42, -.23]). Finally, adolescents' ability to forgive was found to moderate the effect of bullying victimization ( $b = -.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-.39, -.13]). Results indicate that the impact of having been a victim of bullying on psychological adjustment varies as a function of the level of forgiveness (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1***Simple moderation model*

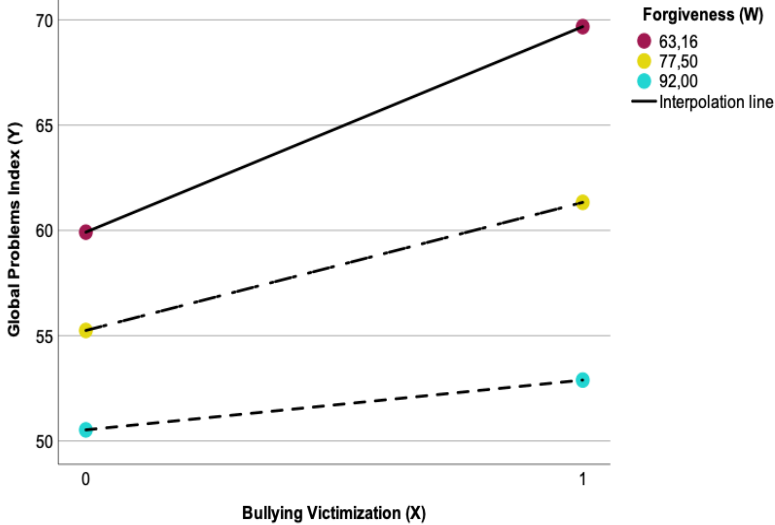
*Note.* Simple moderation model in which the relationship between bullying victimization (X) and psychological adjustment (Y) is moderated by the level of forgiveness (W).

Analysis of conditional effects (see Figure 2) showed that: (1) with low levels of forgiveness (16th percentile  $\approx 63.16$ ), victimization was associated with a significant increase in psychological problems ( $b = 9.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [7.09, 12.43]); (2) with moderate

levels of forgiveness (50th percentile  $\approx 77.5$ ) the effect was also significant, although smaller in magnitude ( $b = 6.08, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [4.22, 7.95]$ ); while (3) with high levels of forgiveness (84th percentile  $\approx 92$ ), the effect of victimization was no longer significant ( $b = 2.37, p = .078, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.26, 4.99]$ ).

**Figure 2**

*Interaction between bullying victimization and forgiveness on psychological problems*



*Note.* The variable “Bullying Victimization” (X) was coded as 0 = no victim, 1 = victim. The lines represent the effect of victimization on the psychological problems index (Y) at low (P16 = 63.16), medium (P50 = 77.50) and high (P84 = 92.00) levels of forgiveness (W). Only the effects at low and medium levels were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

This study has its own limitations that need to be kept in mind. First, a cross-sectional study (as opposed to a longitudinal study) was carried out, which does not allow us to understand the evolution of forgiveness and psychological adjustment in victimised and non-victimised people from the perspective of the individual’s development. Second, the sampling technique applied, given that it may affect the extrapolation of results and induce biases. Third, the measurement instruments used, since they are self-report measures; consequently, they may be subject to response bias on the part of the participants, which may lead to social desirability and denial in the responses (Fariña et al., 2017). Fourth, the analyses carried out, as they are based on a global measure of the constructs that have been studied, both in the case of forgiveness and in the case of psychological adjustment. Fifth, the influence of other types of variables not assessed in this research that could have mediating and/or moderating effects on

the variables under study. Sixth, the statistical model error. With these limitations in mind, the results obtained are discussed below.

Firstly, the results showed that 37.7%, 95% CI [ .325, .420], of adolescents identified themselves as having a low level of forgiveness, with 25.8% of the 149 cases identified with low forgiveness being girls and 9.1% boys. Specifically, regarding the forgiveness dimensions, self-forgiveness received the highest scores, followed by forgiveness of others, and finally forgiveness of situations. These findings provide an overview of the forgiveness process in adolescence, across its three dimensions. The fact that 37.7% of adolescents identified with a low level of forgiveness underscores the need to intervene in this area during adolescence. Regarding gender, the higher proportion of girls (25.8%) with low forgiveness levels compared to boys (9.1%) may indicate greater vulnerability among girls in terms of forgiveness. Indeed, our results confirmed gender differences, with girls showing lower scores, consistent with findings by Fariña, Novo et al. (2024) and Kaleta and Mróz (2022), but in total disagreement with the meta-analysis conducted by Miller et al. (2008). Altogether, this highlights the importance of examining the gender variable (Kaleta & Mróz, 2022; Kuzubova et al., 2021; Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018). Regarding the dimensions of the forgiveness process, it appears that adolescents find it more difficult to accept events perceived as uncontrollable or unjust (such as traumatic or adverse situations). This may have implications for designing programs that specifically address the acceptance and coping with these types of events, such as victimization experiences, which are associated with poorer psychological adjustment (Marcos et al., 2024; Montes et al., 2022).

Secondly, regarding the relationship between forgiveness and victimization, a significant association was observed,  $\chi^2(1) = 34.75, p < .05$ , with 37.7% of the population showing low forgiveness and bullying victimization. These results provide clear empirical evidence on the association of both variables, in line with others (Jahangir & Aziz, 2023; Quintana-Orts et al., 2021). Thus, it is reinforced that integrating forgiveness into bullying intervention programmes could contribute to reducing the negative impact of victimization experiences (Handayani & Purwandari, 2024). From the paradigm of Therapeutic Jurisprudence, forgiveness becomes key (Fariña & Oyhamburu, 2021), especially in those cases of bullying that go beyond conflict resolution and require understanding, managing and coping with the situation of victimization in the agents involved.

Third, these findings suggest that forgiveness acts as a protective factor, attenuating the adverse effects derived from the experience of victimization on psychological adjustment. Higher capacity to forgive, the lower the negative impact of bullying on psychological adjustment. In this sense, adolescents with higher levels of forgiveness show a less intense and non-significant relationship between bullying victimization and psychological adjustment. In other words, the significant improvements that forgiveness brings about in relation to mental health are supported, as advocated by recent studies (Barcaccia et al., 2020; Kaleta & Mróz, 2023; Lampropoulou et al., 2023; Toussaint et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it is difficult to know whether forgiveness improves psychological well-being or whether people with higher psychological well-being have a greater tendency to forgive, which would then act as a protective factor in situations of mental health risk.

Future research should explore these variables in greater depth, using models that allow for the examination of more complex relationships between them. It is advisable

to include additional socio-demographic variables, as well as to analyse the relevance of significant life events in relation to forgiveness. From an applied perspective, promoting forgiveness in victims of bullying could contribute to mitigating the psychological impact of victimization, favouring a better overall adjustment (van Rensburg & Raubenheimer, 2015; Wang et al., 2023). Thus, it would be advisable to develop intervention programmes in the school setting focused on social and emotional skills that can contribute significantly to favour forgiveness (Rapp et al., 2022), thus promoting a more forgiving context (Rapp et al., 2022), thus promoting a school context more prone to forgiveness and with fewer bullying situations (Handayani & Purwandari, 2024); since the process of forgiveness involves inhibiting feelings of anger and making a deliberate decision to let go of negative emotions (Schumann & Walton, 2022; Song et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2020), i.e., it requires a cognitive effort that must be taught from an early age.

In sum, forgiveness study is receiving increasing attention, so the findings of this research could be considered when designing action plans in the educational field that focus on promoting mental health during adolescence, as this is a fundamental stage in person's development (Daniele et al., 2022; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2021). In order to promote a willingness to forgive could help reduce the negative emotions intensity, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and prevent victimization in bullying contexts.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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