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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bullying in early adolescence: An exploratory study in Saudi Arabia



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Abstract *Background and objectives:* This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of bullying among intermediate school students in Saudi Arabia to inform preventive measures. *Materials and methods:* Qualitative methods were applied. The study was conducted at four intermediate schools. Students, parents, and school professionals participated, and data were collected through observations, interviews, and focus groups. Emergent themes and sub-themes were identified through coding.

Results: A total of 91 individuals participated: 40 students, 31 school professionals, and 20 parents/caregivers. Three main themes and multiple subthemes were identified: 1) types of bullying, 2) factors encouraging bullying, and 3) the impact of bullying. The lack of safe environments, recreational facilities, and inconsistencies in addressing problematic behaviors were subthemes that were found to be conducive to bullying, whereas dislike of school, racism, aggressiveness, and social isolation were emergent subthemes that were reflective of the potential impact of bullying. With this process, a model for bullying practices is described.

Conclusion: A better understanding of the bullying experiences among adolescents has been obtained. Preventive measures need to target the factors that the participants identified as conducive to bullying.

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1. Introduction

Bullying, which is known to occur globally among children and adolescents, comprises repeated forms of physical, verbal, social, or emotional aggression that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The victim, perpetrator, and the witnesses of bullying may suffer from serious long-term consequences [1], including devastating effects on the individuals' mental, social, and physical health. In 1983, the suicide of three bullied children in Norway was the leading reason for the first serious intervention at the national level to confront bullying [2]. Children may be bullied for various reasons, including their appearance, speech, or lack of coping mechanisms [3].

Bullying has been reported at varying rates around the world. Globally, 17–69% of 13 year old students have reported exposure to bullying [4]. Prevention programs have been developed which focus on education and increasing the awareness of bullying and its negative impacts [5,6]. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), bullying has only been addressed very recently. Some large-scale epidemiological studies have been conducted in recent years and have provided national estimates for the prevalence of bullying. *Jeeluna*, a national study addressing the health needs of adolescents in the KSA, found that 25% of students had reported being exposed to bullying within the past one month preceding the study. Males were more likely to engage in bullying compared to females (27.1% versus 22.7%) [7]. Adults in the KSA reported their adverse childhood experiences, including exposure to bullying during the first 18 years of their lives. It was found that 21.5% of adults reported exposure to peer violence during their childhood, with males reporting this more often than females (28.2% versus 14.7%) [8]. Although there appears to be insufficient awareness of the issue, bullying is apparently prevalent in KSA, as is the case in other parts of the world.

In KSA, the first anti-bullying campaign was conducted by the National Family Safety Program (NFSP) in 2011. Trained adolescent volunteers provided peer education to students in schools in the capital city, Riyadh [9]. The campaign was well received by students and school professionals. National efforts are now needed to combat this problem. The aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of adolescents' experiences of bullying to further inform the necessary preventive efforts.

2. Materials and methods

This is a cross-sectional study that was conducted in the capital city of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in April 2014.

2.1. Study area/setting

The study was carried out at male and female intermediate schools in Riyadh. Four schools (two male and two female) were selected and invited to participate. The schools included both public and private schools. Schools in KSA are generally gender segregated. A minority of schools are co-educated, but these schools were not included in this study.

The participants included 1) students in intermediate school (grades 7–9), 2) parents/caregivers of students

attending the participating schools, and 3) school professionals (teachers, counselors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, and principals) working at the participating schools.

Students participating in the focus groups were selected through a combined process of random sampling using student lists and targeted sampling based on observations (see below). Parents and school professionals were invited to participate based on the purposive method: school administrators were asked to select the school professionals and parents/caregivers that, in their opinion, would be most willing to participate in and contribute to the discussion on this subject.

2.2. Data collection

Multiple means were used for data collection:

- 1) Observations: Students at each participating school were observed during recess, including students in grades 7–9. Observations of verbal and non-verbal expressions of students at the participating schools were conducted and documented through note taking.
- 2) Focus groups (FGs): Three focus groups were conducted at each school: one each with students, parents/caregivers, and school professionals. A discussion guide using short, simple, and open-ended questions was used. FGs were audio-recorded. Additional observations of non-verbal communication were noted.
- 3) Individual interviews: One interview was conducted at each school with the school principal/vice principal. These in-depth interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of her/his experiences with the peer relationships and bullying that takes place at the school. A semi-structured interview guide was used with further investigative discussion as needed.

Data collection was carried out by two research teams, one group of male researchers and one group of female researchers, as access to the schools is gender based. Each team was comprised of an experienced senior qualitative researcher and 2–3 junior researchers. The two senior researchers conducted structured and standardized training for the junior researchers' field work and data collection. Attendance and completion of the training prior to his/her involvement in the study was a prerequisite for all junior researchers.

The FGs and individual interviews were led by the senior researchers. The junior and senior researchers were responsible for note taking, documentation, and posing additional questions. The focus groups and individual interviews were all conducted in Arabic.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed alongside the ongoing data collection. Based on well-known and rigorous qualitative analysis methods and an inductive approach [10–12], the data were reviewed and analyzed. Emergent concepts were identified and grouped to form themes. The themes were reviewed by the researchers, and through consensus, the final emergent themes were agreed upon. The verbatim

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