



The parallel culture of bullying in polish secondary schools: A grounded theory study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Bullying is a universal phenomenon observed in all schools worldwide, with as many as 35% of students being involved in bullying. Group context is crucial for understanding and preventing bullying, as peers are often present in bullying situations and have key roles in maintaining, preventing, or stopping it. The aims of this study were to investigate school bullying as a social phenomenon in Poland and to understand how Polish adolescents perceive, discuss, and make sense of bullying in their communities.

Methods: I carried out fieldwork at three public secondary schools in a city in southern Poland, and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 26 students aged 16/17 (16 girls, 10 boys). I used the grounded theory approach to analyze the data, as it offered an opportunity for deeper understanding of adolescents' social context and culture, with intragroup interactions playing a central role.

Results & conclusions: The results suggest that a parallel culture of bullying at the micro level is created at these schools, which includes norms; a multi-stage process of victim creation; and rituals confirming the victim's status, group coherence, and other students' attitudes and roles in the bullying. In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest that it could prove beneficial to plan anti-bullying programs with adolescents themselves, as they could clarify the contexts, situations, or triggers that might lead to bullying.

Traditionally, bullying has been defined as repeated actions of aggression, harassment, or exclusion. It has negative health and psychosocial consequences for all students involved (DeLara, 2018; Olweus, 2002; Rivers, Poterat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009) and is one of the most distressing experiences for a child or adolescent, especially when it occurs repeatedly over a prolonged period (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Wójcik & Kozak, 2015). Bullying seems universal—it is observed in nearly all schools worldwide (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wójcik & Hełka, 2018). According to a review of 80 studies, involvement in traditional bullying and cyberbullying has a prevalence of 35% and 15%, respectively (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014).

Recently, scholars have underlined the importance of considering the social context of bullying (Horton, 2011, 2016; Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral, 2017; Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Thornberg, 2017; Thornberg, Landgren, & Wiman, 2018). There is a particular need to analyze the school and peer context, culture norms, power, and interaction patterns, and to consider bullying as an interactive social process. Bullying is not an isolated interpersonal phenomenon, but a sociocultural one that depends strongly on peers' and adults' actions in particular social settings. Students' roles and reactions in bullying situations, and the variations in bullying that occur across class units, depend mainly on how students interpret the context and how they judge themselves from the viewpoint of their class or peer group (Salmivalli, 2014; Thornberg, 2011; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018; Wójcik & Mondry, 2017). As Horton

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(2011) suggests, it may be more useful to conceptualize bullying as a social phenomenon that involves ordinary children in unique situations, as opposed to assuming that a large number of children are merely aggressive or “evil-minded.”

Researchers are increasingly examining the contextual factors and social processes of bullying. While there is much research on the variables associated with students' behaviors in bullying situations (Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014; Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014; Mazzone, Camodeca, & Salmivalli, 2016; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018; Yun & Graham, 2018), most of these studies adopted quantitative methods. Although these methods provide crucial information about bullying and students' actions, they limit opportunities to discuss bullying from students' own unique viewpoints.

Some researchers have been seeking to address this gap by using qualitative methods, which enable them to study bullying as a social process and develop an understanding of the culture and group processes involved from students' perspectives. Thornberg's (2011) review of qualitative research on bullying, and several recent studies (Forsberg et al., 2016; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Mazzone, Thornberg, Stefanelli, Cadei, & Caravita, 2018; Thornberg et al., 2018), paint a complex picture of how cultural patterns, labelling and stigma processes, power structures, social hierarchies, exclusion and inclusion processes, and the social ordering of belonging can contribute to bullying. However, Forsberg, Thornberg, and Samuelsson (2014) claim that this picture is incomplete; we simply have too little information about what students themselves associate with excluding and pro-bullying behavior and how they interpret the opportunities, constraints, and bystander actions during bullying incidents. Many students do not agree with adults concerning what behaviors should be regarded as bullying (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; DeLara, 2012; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2017; Hellström, Persson, & Hagquist, 2015). Vaillancourt et al. (2008), for example, found that when defining bullying, students did not focus on intentionality, repetition, or power imbalance, but rather on specific bullying incidents. Younger children, for example, focused on physical and verbal aggression, while adolescents focused on relational aggression, especially excluding behaviors. Such a tendency is present not only in studies focusing on bullying but also in studies on other aspects of adolescents' lives, such as risky behaviors. As Rodham, Brewer, Mistral, and Stallard (2006) noted, most studies have concentrated on the frequency of engaging in a particular risky behavior but miss out on what “risk” means to adolescents. Thus, it is crucial to carry out further research that gives students the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their own understanding of bullying, its context, and the way they perceive interpersonal relations within a peer group, which, for them, is “the half-way house between the family and the adult world” (and thus of vital importance; Gay, 1992, p. 207, p. 207).

Such research may be particularly necessary in Poland, as there are currently few studies exploring Polish adolescents' perspectives on bullying and its context (Thuściak-Deliowska, 2018; Wójcik & Mondry, 2017). Therefore, I investigated the main concerns and perspectives of Polish adolescents on bullying.

The current study implemented a social-ecological perspective on bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, 2004; Horton, 2016; Mazzone et al., 2018; Thornberg, 2015, 2017), according to which peer victimization is a social phenomenon established and maintained by the complex interplay of contextual and individual factors, and deeply embedded within the school and class context (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018). Social-ecological theory conceptualizes adolescents' social environment as comprising various interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), including the microsystem (i.e., individuals or groups with whom the adolescent interacts in the immediate environment), mesosystem (i.e., interrelations among microsystems, such as the influences of school, teaching, and administrative staff), and macrosystem (i.e., a cultural blueprint that determines the choices and activities of the microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). I focus on the microsystem—adolescents' behavior is arguably most influenced this system, particularly their peer group (Espelage, 2014; Horton, 2016), and adolescents are considered active agents in the construction of their own micro-level culture, which is collectively produced and shared with significant others (Corsaro, 2005). Accordingly, bullying is considered a collective action embracing social roles, stigmatization, co-constructions of meaning, and social ordering processes (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Garandeau et al., 2014; Thornberg, 2007, 2011). Understanding adolescents' perspectives on bullying can help researchers recognize the settings in which bullying is strengthened, and determine why some students are more prone to bullying involvement.

My main intentions were to investigate school bullying as a social phenomenon and to understand how Polish secondary school students (aged 16–18) perceive, discuss, and make sense of bullying in their community. I used the grounded theory approach, as it allows for a deeper understanding of adolescents' social context and culture, with intragroup interactions playing central roles (Swearer & Doll, 2001). It can also help explore bullying as a set of social processes in the everyday context (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006) and determine the interaction, interpretation, and meaning of those processes (Charmaz, 2017).

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The Polish school system begins with preschool at around age 6, followed by 12 years of compulsory schooling: six years of primary school (age 7–12), three of middle school (age 13–15), and three of secondary school (age 16–18). Classrooms are constant units for all of secondary school, with students remaining together for all or most of their courses. I examined only secondary school students. Following approval by the university research ethics committee, a convenience sample of five secondary schools was selected from the city board of education. Head teachers were contacted, and the research aims and procedure explained. Three schools agreed to participate, after which ethical procedures and dates for data collection were arranged. Students were recruited by asking them to volunteer; 32 adolescents ultimately volunteered. However, four parents did not permit their children to participate, and two students were absent during data collection due to illness, so only 26 participants aged 16/17 (16 girls, 10 boys) were

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