



## Bullying in South-East Asian Countries: A review



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### ABSTRACT

Bullying among young people is a major concern for educators and health professionals. It has been mostly studied in Western countries, but with a significant amount of research in the Asian Pacific Rim countries of Japan, South Korea, Mainland China and Hong Kong, which suggests that it can exhibit different characteristics in other cultural contexts. Research in this area in South-East Asian countries has been relatively neglected, but has begun to appear in recent years. Here, we review studies on bullying in the 10 ASEAN countries. We summarize the nature and main findings of these studies, and comment on similarities and differences with studies in Western and Asian Pacific Rim societies. Finally we make suggestions for future research which will enhance comparability, respecting cultural differences but moving toward a more effective comparative analysis.

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### Contents

1.	Studies in Western and Asian Pacific Rim societies . . . . .	23
2.	Comparative neglect of studies in South-East Asian countries . . . . .	24
3.	Literature search . . . . .	24
4.	Data presented in Table 2 . . . . .	24
4.1.	Sample size . . . . .	24
4.2.	Date of study . . . . .	24
4.3.	Language and linguistic terms used . . . . .	24
4.4.	Definitions of bullying . . . . .	24
4.5.	Measures used . . . . .	27
4.6.	Main findings . . . . .	27
5.	Two comparative data sets . . . . .	27
5.1.	Comparative data from GSHS (Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia) . . . . .	27
5.2.	Comparative data from TIMMS (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) . . . . .	27
6.	Research on bullying by country . . . . .	28
6.1.	Countries with no local research: Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, Myanmar . . . . .	28
6.2.	Countries with one extended report: Cambodia and Vietnam . . . . .	28
6.2.1.	Cambodia . . . . .	28
6.2.2.	Vietnam . . . . .	28
6.3.	Countries with limited local research: Indonesia, Philippines . . . . .	28
6.3.1.	Indonesia . . . . .	28
6.3.2.	Philippines . . . . .	28
6.4.	Countries with more extensive local research: Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand . . . . .	29
6.4.1.	Malaysia . . . . .	29
6.4.2.	Singapore . . . . .	29
6.4.3.	Thailand . . . . .	30
7.	Discussion . . . . .	31
7.1.	Limitations of reporting . . . . .	32

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7.2. Prevalence of bullying . . . . .	32
7.3. Cyberbullying . . . . .	32
7.4. Gender differences . . . . .	32
7.5. Other findings . . . . .	33
7.6. A call for more qualitative research . . . . .	33
7.7. Moving toward explanations for cultural differences in bullying . . . . .	33
7.8. Neglect of some important variables . . . . .	33
7.9. Relevance for interventions to reduce bullying . . . . .	33
8. Summary . . . . .	33
References . . . . .	34
Website references . . . . .	35

Bullying, or the systematic abuse of power, can be physical, verbal, or relational, and direct (face-to-face) or indirect. Bullying is generally considered as a subset of aggression, distinguished by the criteria of repetition, and imbalance of power (Olweus, 1999). In the last decade especially, cyberbullying has emerged through the use of modern communication technologies (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014), with some debate as to whether the same defining criteria apply (Bauman, Cross, & Walker, 2013).

Bullying has been extensively studied in Western countries. However a significant amount of research in the Asian Pacific Rim countries suggests that it can exhibit different characteristics in other cultural contexts, and points to cultural and educational aspects of interest in explanations of this. Research in the 10 ASEAN countries of South-East Asian countries is comparatively sparse, but is starting to appear. Here, we review published studies on bullying in these countries, including their characteristics and methodological features. We summarize the main findings of these studies, comment on similarities and differences with studies in Western and Pacific Rim societies, and note some limitations of the research to date. We conclude with suggestions for how future research can respect cultural differences but move toward a more effective comparative analysis.

## 1. Studies in Western and Asian Pacific Rim societies

Most of the now extensive research on bullying and cyberbullying has been carried out in Western countries. For example, the *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective* (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010) has 41 chapters, but only 2 represent perspectives outside Europe, North America and Australia (1 comparative, 1 on Japan).

Prevalence figures from Western countries are available from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) surveys, which collect data from 11-, 13- and 15-year olds from nationally representative samples, every 4 years. The reports on bullying are based on a single victim item and a single bully item, adapted from the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Solberg & Olweus, 2003); a widely-used definition of bullying is given (mentioning repetition, and imbalance of power). Victim or bully rates are calculated from 'at least two or three times in the past couple of months' or more (so, ignoring 'it only happened once or twice'). The 2005/2006 survey gives average rates (over 40 countries) of 10.7% for bullying others, and 12.6% for being bullied (victims) (Craig et al., 2009). The 2009/2010 survey gives average rates (over 38 countries) of 10.3% for bullying others, and 11.3% for being bullied (Currie et al., 2012). The countries surveyed are mostly European, but also include the United States, Canada, Russian Federation, and Ukraine; no data from Asian countries is included.

The phenomenon of bullying does appear to have some broad similarities across these Western cultures, but there are differences as well as similarities with the forms it takes in Asian Pacific Rim societies; substantial research has taken place in Japan, South Korea, Mainland China and Hong Kong (see Smith, Kwak, & Toda, in press).

In Japan, Kanetsuna and Smith (2002); Kanetsuna, Smith, and Morita (2006) compared *ijime* (the term closest to *bullying* in Japanese) and *bullying* in England. They found some significant differences. In Japan, pupils reported *ijime* as most likely to come from pupils that they knew well, of similar age and often within the classroom; in England, pupils reported *bullying* as often coming from pupils they did not know well, often older, and often in the playground.

A somewhat similar pattern of difference comes from studies of *wang-ta* in South Korea, by Koo, Kwak, and Smith (2008) and Lee, Smith, and Monks (2011, 2012). *Wang-ta* also seems to occur between pupils who know each other (e.g. former friends). Within a classroom context this can mean the whole class shunning one pupil. It can take the form of even more severe social exclusion, where another term *jun-ta* refers to the whole school labeling the victim and shunning that person.

Japan, and South Korea, are considered as more collectivist societies than most Western industrialized countries (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010); a more collectivistic culture may imply a greater possibility of concerted whole-group (e.g. whole-class) norms emerging, which could at times be aggressive—thus the possibility of severe whole-class aggression and shunning of a victim. In addition, Japan and South Korea may be considered more hierarchical, scoring high on the Hofstede (1980) power distance index; there is more respect for older persons, including older pupils, such that (ab)use of power by older persons will be more likely to be seen as legitimate and not as bullying (Hofstede, 1980; Smith, Bond, & Kagitçibasi, 2005).

There have also been a number of studies of bullying in Mainland China, and Hong Kong. Schwartz, Chang, and Farver (2001) examined peer group victimization in a Chinese primary school. The correlates of victimization, such as poorer academic functioning, submissive-withdrawn behavior, and aggression, suggested "considerable similarity in the processes underlying peer group victimization across Chinese and Western cultural settings" (p.520); and subsequently, in a similar study in Hong Kong schools, Tom, Schwartz, Chang, Farver, and Xu (2010) stated that they were "able to replicate the behavioral and academic correlates of peer victimization from past research conducted in the West and Mainland China with children in Hong Kong" (p.35); although they noted that "forms of victimization that involve social exclusion and causing harm to relationships may be particularly relevant in Chinese children's peer groups" (p.35). Wong, Lok, Lo, and Ma (2008) also reported on frequency and correlates of bullying in Hong Kong primary schools; one notable aspect in their report was an appreciable frequency of 'extortion' as well as the more familiar forms of bullying from Western studies.

In summary, studies of bullying in the Asian Pacific Rim countries suggest that there may be important differences from western countries in terms of who does the bullying (friends in the same class, or relative strangers), where it happens (classroom, playground), and types of bullying (severity of social exclusion, prevalence of extortion). In addition, definitions of bullying-like phenomena show linguistic variation, and may be influenced by what is viewed as legitimate or illegitimate power relations. Possible explanatory factors for these differences may

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