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Traditional school bullying and cyberbullying in Chinese societies: Prevalence and a review of the whole-school intervention approach

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ABSTRACT

Traditional school bullying and cyberbullying have been a growing concern globally. In this review, we first review the prevalence of traditional school bullying and cyberbullying in selected major Chinese societies, namely the Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Empirical findings on the characteristics of bullying perpetrators, victims, and the offense circumstances are described. As an intervention strategy, we then comprehensively review the whole-school intervention approach in tackling traditional school bullying and cyberbullying. Its origin, key components, and different factors that may contribute to the effective implementation of the whole-school approach in preventing and reducing bullying behaviors among children and adolescents are discussed. We conclude the review with potential implications for the application of this intervention approach in tackling traditional school bullying and cyberbullying in Chinese societies.

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1. Introduction

Traditional school bullying has been regarded as a serious concern in school worldwide. As one of the most common and potentially serious forms of school violence (Larson, Smith, & Furlong, 2002), children and adolescents who are victimized and those who perpetrate bullying

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behavior are often associated with serious short- and long-term implications, with particularly on their subsequent psychosocial adjustment (e.g., resilience) and life outcomes (e.g., delinquency). In general, bullying perpetration behaviors involve an individual being exposed regularly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more students, which can be in the form of physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., name calling), and nonverbal relational (e.g., social exclusion) actions (Guo et al., 2010; Olweus, 1978). A negative action, in simple, referred to as a type of aggressive or antisocial behavior by which an individual intentionally inflicts (or attempts to inflict) physical and/or psychological injury or discomfort upon another individual.

Bullying perpetration behavior can range from simple verbal teasing to violent physical conduct. Therefore, potential for further escalation (e.g., delinquent behavior), including status violation (e.g., running away and truancy), property offending (e.g., burglary, robbery, and fraud), and violent offending (e.g., serious assault, sexual assault, and homicide) are possible. The life course developmental theory posited a positive correlation between childhood behavioral misconducts and later criminality (e.g., Moffitt, 1993; Nagin & Tremblay, 1999). Empirically, evidence indicates that children and adolescents who perpetrate bullying behavior are in a higher tendency than those non-bullying perpetrators to be official and self-reported delinquents later in their life (e.g., Farrington, 1992; Hamalainen & Pulkkinen, 1995; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999; Pope & Bierman, 1999; Rigby & Cox, 1996). Olweus (1994) found that, relative to non-bullies, adolescents who victimized their peers were four times more likely to become recidivist delinquents. Kumpulainen and Rasanen (2000), in their Finnish sample of children, found that those who involved in bullying perpetration at the age of eight to 12 were at an increased risk of delinquency by the age of 15. Recent research further found that school bullying behavior is a predictor of later delinquency, violence, and other antisocial behavior in adulthood (e.g., Bender & Lösel, 2011; Farrington & Ttofl, 2011).

In spite of the potential negative effects of school bullying perpetrators on their later outcomes, the adverse outcomes of being victims of school bullying have also been well-researched in the literature (e.g., Craig, 1998; Pellegrini, 2001). Among others, prolonged victimization by peers is found to result in various negative outcomes, such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, avoidant behavior, loneliness, low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, impaired concentration, and academic and school problems (Chan & Wong, 2015; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2000; Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005; Roland, 2000; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). Continued bullying could also resulted in other problems, such as skipping school, diminished concentration in problem-solving, and sleeping difficulties (Khatri, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 2000; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). The problems could disrupt children and adolescents' learning at school, by which later prevent them from fulfilling their potential (Craig, 1998; Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005). Perhaps, these psychological effects could be more detrimental for victims of bullying as the victimization could persist for an extended period of time.

With the rapid advancement in technology, bullying behaviors are not limited to traditional school bullying through physical contact. Over the past decade, information and communication technology (ICT) has played a dominant role in the lives of adolescents. Most children and adolescents make use of the Internet, smartphones, tablets, and computers, as part of their daily routines in keeping in contact with one another. It is estimated that over 90% of European and American adolescents are online *netizen* (e.g., Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzog, & Olafsson, 2011; Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitters, and other chat rooms, instant messengers, and social networking sites are important tools to maintain their social life. Although the Internet has provided numerous advantages to the young generation, the misuse or abuse of this technological advancement may result in the perpetration of antisocial behavior in the cyberspace. One form of antisocial behavior on the Internet is cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is largely referred to as the deliberate and repeated aggressive act intentionally performed by an individual or a group of individuals, using electronic forms of contact against an individual who is unable to easily defend himself or herself (Huang & Chou, 2010; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Smith et al., 2008). The anonymity on the Internet makes it easy for children and adolescents to engage in cyberbullying without much concern. Cyberbullying behavior can be categorized as either overt or relational aggressive behaviors. Overt aggressive behaviors are often manifested through electronic text, such as sending threatening or abusive messages to the victims; while relational aggressive harassments are typically comprised of impersonation (i.e., manipulating the victim's social relationships by sending messages to others through the victim's hacked electronic account), denigration (i.e., posting embarrassing photos, rumors, or personal information on the Internet), exclusion (i.e., purposefully barring the victim's from entering an online social activity), and outing/trickery (i.e., divulging personal, embarrassing, or sensitive information that is shared in confidence in an electronic format to unintended recipients; Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2009; Willard, 2007). Comparable with traditional school bullying, cyberbullying perpetration poses a heightened risk of escalation. At its most extreme, cyberbullying perpetration could lead to sexual harassment, stalking episodes, and even death threats (Shariff, 2005; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002).

In the past, findings about children and adolescents' bullying behavior are largely derived from research conducted in the West (e.g., Europe, the United States, Australia, and Canada). The school bullying phenomenon in the East, particularly the Asia region, is relatively under-explored until recent decades. Earlier research on the Asian populations was only started to emerge in the late 1990s, with a series of Japanese traditional school bullying studies were published (Morita, Soeda, Soeda, & Taki, 1999; Yoneyama, 1999; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). Studies conducted in other Asian countries, especially the Greater China region followed (Chen, 2001; Wei, Jonson-Reid, & Tsao, 2007; Wong, 2004). With the number of school bullying studies conducted on the Chinese populations is growing, the focus of this article is first to review the prevalence of traditional school bullying and cyberbullying in four selected major Chinese societies in Asia, namely the Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Empirical findings on the characteristics of bullying perpetrators, victims, and the offense circumstances are described. The complexity of the etiology of school bullying has made the prevention and intervention of this incidence a challenging task. Among others, the Olweus' whole-school intervention approach, based on the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), has found to be a widely-used strategy in tackling school bullying issues (Olweus, 1993). Hence, this article next comprehensively reviews the whole-school intervention approach in combating school bullying, with implications for its application in Chinese societies.

2. The prevalence and characteristics of traditional school bullying in Chinese societies

Collectivism is highly valued for the benefits of interpersonal harmony, in which people in collectivist societies are willing to sacrifice their individual interests for the needs of the larger group. This cultural value is clearly observed in most Chinese societies. As such, school bullying has often been perceived as a collective conduct in Chinese societies (Cheng, Chen, Ho, & Cheng, 2011; Chui & Chan, 2015; Huang, Hong, & Espelage, 2013) for the purpose of maintaining group conformity (Wang & Tamis-Lemonda, 2003). Therefore, social exclusion, as a form of peer victimization, has found to be relatively common in Chinese schools (e.g., Chen, Rubin, & Li, 1995; Rubin, Chen, & Hymel, 1993; Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001).