



EDITORIAL

Bullying behavior, youth's disease and intervention: which suggestions from the data for research on bullying in the Brazilian context? ☆, ☆☆☆



Comportamento de bullying, doenças na juventude e intervenção: quais são as sugestões das pesquisas sobre bullying no contexto brasileiro?

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Since the influential work by Dan Olweus,¹ bullying has emerged as a major problem of the society all over world and across societies. The international literature reports rates of children and adolescents involved in bullying in different countries ranging from 7% to 43% for victims and from 5% to 44% for bullies.² Moreover, the studies agree in highlighting how bullying constitutes a factor of risk for the health as well as the social and psychological adjustment of both the bullied and the bullying youth. Children and adolescents who suffer victimization by peers can be affected by several health problems, including physical and psychological disease symptoms, both concurrently and prospectively.^{3,4} Likewise, there is evidence that bullies can also suffer from depression and other diseases,⁴ and that they are at risk of externalizing behavior and involvement in criminal activities in late adolescence and adulthood.⁵

In addition to bullies and victims, other school- and classmates participate in bullying by playing different roles in the phenomenon. They can act as helpers or reinforcers of the bullies; a minority act as defenders of the bullied peers; other pupils serve as passive bystanders, who withdraw from the bullying situations by not taking side for the bullies or the victims, hence indirectly reinforcing the bullies' behavior.⁶ Being involved in bullying as an active or passive bystander can also affect psychological adjustment during youth, because witnessing bullying has been found to increase the levels of bystanders' distress.⁷ This framework, as well as the high costs to society of bullying, makes investigating the phenomenon, and developing intervention programs that are able to fight bullying specifically and effectively, a priority for any country in which bullying is detected.

Several proposals for the anti-bullying interventions have been developed, with different theoretical approaches and different levels of effectiveness.⁸ However, all of them recommend starting from an accurate screening of the phenomenon in the context of future intervention. Indeed, one of the main assumptions for anti-bullying intervention is that bullying, in comparison to other forms of aggressive and anti-social behaviors, has a higher complexity, which needs to be investigated in the specific context to be fought effectively.

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In this framework, the originality and the worth of the paper by de Oliveira et al.⁹ is evident, especially considering the scarcity of studies on bullying at school in Brazil¹⁰ and, in a broader perspective, in South America. This study provides relevant data on the prevalence of bullies in a population sample of 109,104 eighth-grade pupils; 20.8% of the sample reported bullying behavior at school. These data indicate a high rate of bullying in Brazilian schools in comparison to other countries, and it comes from self-report evaluations by the participants. This is important because, as the authors themselves consider, self-reports may have increased the risk of under-estimating the prevalence of bullying. However, the use of self-reports for initial screening of bullying is in line with the usual procedure adopted in international studies. Thus, even though administering the standard measure to assess bullying for cross-national comparisons (*i.e.*, the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire)^{1,5,11} was not possible in this study, the research by de Oliveira et al. provided data on bullying that is comparable with the international literature. Moreover, the large size of the sample also guarantees a reliable assessment of the situations of bullying in Brazilian elementary schools. Hence, the high rate of bullies that has been found by de Oliveira et al. suggests that addressing bullying is a possible priority for research and future intervention in Brazil.

In order to develop Brazilian programs to prevent and fight bullying at school effectively, an accurate analysis of the correlates associated to a higher risk of behaving bullying among Brazilian pupils is needed. This is the second relevant contribution provided by de Oliveira et al. to the research on bullying. Indeed, this study examines some indexes of possible social and psychological adjustment disorders of bullies, and some family dimensions possibly related to a higher probability to bully peers at school. This allows for the construction of an initial profile of the bullies that is specific to the Brazilian society. The picture emerging from the study indicates that male gender and older relative age are associated with an increased probability to be an aggressor. These findings, as well as those regarding scarce family supervision in bullies' families, and domestic violence experienced by bullies, are similar to the results obtained in other international literature. However, the outcomes on the ethnicity of the bullies, together with data derived from the comparison between private and public school, highlight some elements that are specific to Brazilian culture and that call for further investigation. In particular, the authors found that black and Asian youth as well as pupils attending private schools are more likely to be bullies. In light of the literature on bullying, these findings cannot be adequately interpreted without a larger perspective that simultaneously examines the contexts in which bullying occurs more deeply. Indeed, bullying is not only a particular form of aggression, which is proactive,^{12,13} intentional, and aimed at acquiring a powerful position among peers,¹⁴ but it also represents a type of antisocial behavior that is largely influenced by the peer context. The literature on this phenomenon has consistently showed that the status within the peer group^{15,16} and factors at the peer group level, such as informal norms and attitudes shared among school- and classmates,¹⁷ play a relevant role in explaining this behavior. Therefore, the features of the peer context in which bullying among Brazilian students happens need to be carefully

considered. Following this line of reasoning, the finding that belonging to specific ethnicities increases the risk of being a bully cannot be read as an "absolute" index, but rather requires investigation of the majority/minority proportions of ethnic groups in the schools where the data were collected, and, in a broader perspective, within the Brazilian context. These data, indeed, may mirror the presence of forms of discriminatory bullying,¹⁸ of in-/out-group effects, or of informal peer-group norms,¹⁷ which may be established within groups of peers sharing the same ethnicity. We also do not know enough about who were the victims of the bullying actions: for instance, whether the bullied peers belonged to the same or to a different ethnic group of bullies. Accordingly, if, in Brazil, pupils attending private schools are at higher risk to show bullying behaviors, there is a need to further examine the features of the private school context, which may favor bullying in Brazil. Is it possible that bullying is actually favored by specific characteristics of the pupils attending these schools and their families? Or may it depend on features of the organization and the disciplinary norms that are typical of the private school environment in Brazil? Moreover, the school atmosphere and the teachers' attitudes have been found to contribute in promoting or hindering the occurrence of bullying.¹⁹ Therefore, the study by de Oliveira et al. calls for further research focusing on the peer- and school-context dimensions that may be associated to bullying behavior in the Brazilian reality, which can be addressed by anti-bullying interventions.

A third novel contribution from the study by de Oliveira et al. consists of the analysis of the health-risk behaviors associated to being an aggressor among Brazilian pupils. The profile of bullies emerging from their investigation confirms that bullying is an indicator of multidimensional psychological and social adjustment disorders in youth. Apparently, there are higher probabilities of Brazilian bullies reporting risky behaviors in comparison to non-bully peers. Reported risky behaviors ranged from consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs, to missing classes and early sexual intercourse. This picture is not totally novel in the international literature on bullying.²⁰ However, unfortunately, the cross-sectional nature of data from the study by de Oliveira et al. does not allow understanding whether bullying is a predictor of other risk-behaviors among Brazilian children or – more likely – whether it mirrors a complex social and psychological maladjustment profile of Brazilian bullies. This also may be possibly related to distortions in moral development, as some recent literature on bullying suggests.²¹ Nevertheless, undoubtedly this finding by de Oliveira et al. highlights how the social costs associated to bullying are high in Brazil too, and that being a bully during elementary school in Brazil may be an early indicator of multifaceted disease, requiring multidimensional forms of intervention, addressing the family and, moreover, the peers. In fact, peer influence has been shown to be relevant in increasing the probability to bully and to perform risky behaviors.¹⁹

The fact that bullying can be a possible indicator of multi-dimensional difficulties in youth finds a further confirmation in its associations with psychological and social maladjustment, and health-problem symptoms, including insomnia, feelings of loneliness, and lack of friends, as emerging in the study by de Oliveira et al. The reported

feelings of loneliness and of being isolated by peers, in particular, indicate that bullying behavior is linked to the emotional and social diseases of bullies. Reading these feelings as representing possible health problems of bullies, requesting health intervention is a reality, and is very legitimate. However, a more complex reading may highlight some bullies' skills that are possible resources to help these children. Indeed, the international literature on bullies' social competence shows that peers attribute bullies with a high social status, as visible and influential within the group, but that they also report to actually dislike bullies.¹⁵ Hence, bullies' feelings of loneliness and isolation may reflect the actual isolation that is caused by bullies' behavior, showing that bullies have adequate skills in understanding the peer interactions. These skills can be considered when planning health intervention. Lastly, there is also the possibility that the feelings of loneliness experienced by bullies also drive and promote the bullying behavior. Unfortunately, since the data provided by de Oliveira et al. are cross-sectional, we cannot further explore this hypothesis, but, again, this study definitely promotes future research on bullying, and on its correlates and motives among Brazilian students.

In summary, notwithstanding some possible limitations – which are correctly identified by the authors – the study by de Oliveira et al. constitutes an interesting contribution to literature on bullying, and provides some clear indications for future research on this topic in Brazil. These indications are also helpful to develop intervention programs with maximized effectiveness in the Brazilian context.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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