PURSUING BULLYING

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Abstract: *Bullying represents any act of unwanted aggression committed by an individual aggressor or by a group of abusers who are not intimately related, involving power imbalance in the perpetrators' favor. Bullying can cause physical, psychological, social, and educational harm plus moral distress for the victim (Gladden et al. 2014: 17). The present study investigates recognition and children's representations of bullying phenomenon in a school community, in order to better understand its representations in a specific community. Study design combined qualitative and quantitative measures and the results provided a starting point for analyzing the profile of subjects involved in bullying interactions. The sample is from secondary school pupils in the 5th and 6th grades. Participants were 101 pupils of 11-12 age. Instruments included vignettes, indirect scenarios interpreted from drawings, and open-ended questions.*

Keywords: *bullying; victimization; bullying representation ; bullying perceptions ; bullying motives.*

Introduction

Bullying is a deliberate action, involving repetitively negative actions performed by an individual or group with higher social status or more powerful than the victim, involving an unequal power relationship (Olweus, 1993). The victim lacks the resources (physical, psychological, social) to defend him/her or themselves (Hazler, 2001). The victim is found to be vulnerable through some perceived weakness, helplessness and inability to defend; any or all these traits can be exploited by the perpetrator/bully/aggressor. Perpetration of a bully involves carrying out deliberate and repeatedly intended actions meant to cause physical and psychological damage to a person or group of persons, and is part of a complex need for dominance and status (Sutton et al., 1999)

Bystanders are individuals involved in the act of bullying, even if not directly, who assist most by encouraging the action and increasing the probability of the bully to repeat the act. For a better understanding of bullying, it would seem helpful to disclose its meanings and representations within the context where it takes place (i.e. in the school environment).

1. Methodology

This study represents a qualitative approach in the meanings of a better understanding of the victim's and perpetrator's status perceived by all

the pupils involved in an act of bullying at some point in their life. The independent variables targeted subjective responses related to the **perceptions** of the investigated participants.

Method

Participants included 101 pupils in grades 5 and 6, both girls and boys involved in mainstream education schools, located in the Bihor county. Reasons for this selection: Olweus, the father of bullying research, claimed that most of bullying actions happen in the secondary school age (Smith et al., 1999). Smith et al. (1994) argued that the reasons for bullying at early ages (primary and early secondary school) were the lack of social and communication skills in the history of the bully. Victims often lacked networking skills and abilities required to manage assaults and attacks from colleagues (i.e. assertiveness, emotional coping skills, frustration management, positive self-perception).

Inclusion criteria: pupils of grades 5 and 6, attending Bihor County Schools, mainstream education, Romanian native language speakers. The present cohort was selected from an uncontaminated cohort (no other instruments or bullying interventions were applied before) that itself was extracted from a larger ongoing study tackling two classes each from three different schools were investigated.

Procedure: Schools from Oradea were contacted and asked for their participation in the study. Data were collected through vignettes, which were completed during one regular school hour in the classes under the supervision of the researchers. In accordance with the research protocol, parental permission was sought, and pupils were assured that their answers would be kept confidential.

Instruments: The vignettes were comprised of three scenarios that suggested different situations of bullying (physical, verbal and social). The questions assigned to each scenario were aimed at recognition of the bullying acts, perceptions of perpetrator(s) reasons for acting and perception of the victim's status. The items offered several choices and the option for open-ended responses so that the participants were given the opportunity to generate other possible answers than those suggested.

Vignettes appear to have been a widely used method in previous social psychology research in order to assess the representations held by social actors. (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Ginni, 2006). Vignettes were used as a research instrument since the responses to the scenarios provided an insight into the studied interactions of bullying by pursuing the multiple perspectives of the actors involved. The main assumption was that participants identified with the role that fit them best (victim, perpetrator, double role, and spectator).

Measures

The recorded variables included three main topics.

Perception of the interaction type and its form assigned to the item: *What do you think is happening in this picture?* Responses were ranged from three possible options and three possible types whether physical, verbal or social bullying type scenario.

Representation of the victim/perpetrator where free choices were collected and the frequency of the responses was evaluated. Variable of cognitive representation was assigned to the item: *How do you think person x feels? What do you think about that person?* Representations about the emotional status of bully/victim were perceived.

Pursuing the motives behind perpetrators' actions was suggested in the drawn scenarios: *How do you think the person x feels? What do you think about that person?*

2. Results

The distribution of the answers to perception of interaction type and its forms are presented in Figures 1 and 2. The results obtained from frequency analysis revealed a high level of recognition of bullying behavior type. The most commonly used tags were *marginalization, rejection, mockery, intimidation,* and *harassment.* Eighty-five per cent *(*85%) of participants recognized the presented bullying type. They accurately associated *hitting, beating, pushed*, *slapping, shoving* actions to physical bullying, *dirty offensive words, and swearing as* verbal bullying. Also they assigned labels such as *exclusion, rejection and isolation* as social bullying. The tags were hierarchically ordered, as a function of the frequency of responses.

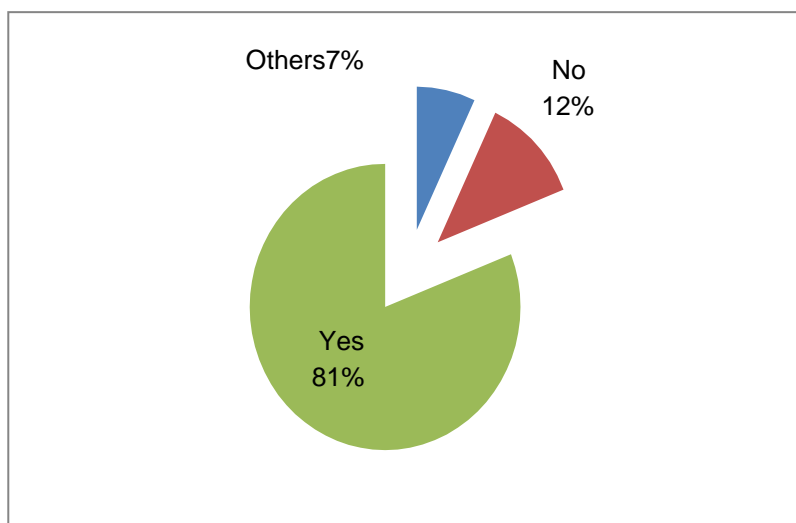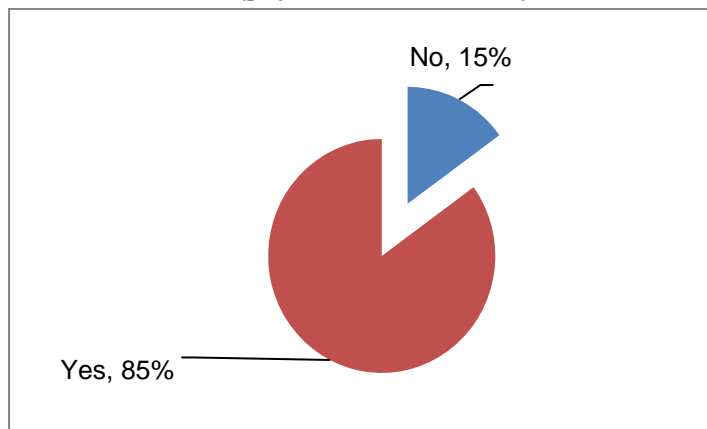**Figure no 1: Chart percentage of bullying behavior recognition**

Figure no 2: Chart percentage of participants who recognize the type of bullying (physical, verbal, social)
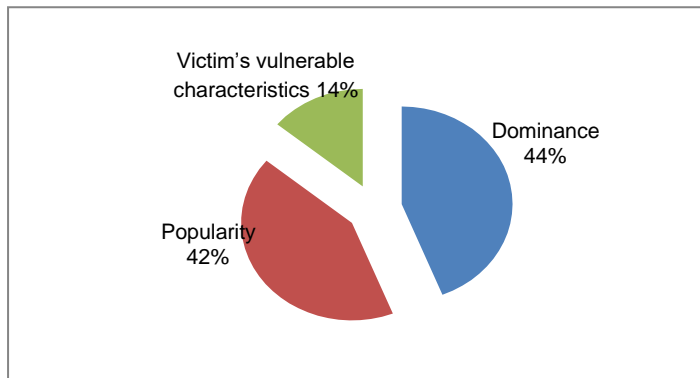

   Representation of the victim Based on the frequency of the responses, as assumed by the present writers, the majority (94%) of participant responses assigned the victim to a vulnerable status in the bullying scenarios. The results confirmed that there was a high probability for the bullying victim to be perceived as being in a state of social/emotional need or vulnerability within the school community. Victims were perceived as *marginalized, intimidated, humiliated, abused, fearful, excluded, ignored, defenseless, empty, embarrassed, useless, and poor*.

   Representation of the perpetrator (those identified as abusers) were perceived as if they *felt good, thinking that it was just a game*, *feel satisfied because they were like the others*, or they were *funny*, *strong*, *proud*, *threatening*, *dubious or mean* and they were socially *mischievous.*

   Pursuing the motives of bullying *Why do you think some children like to hurt other colleagues calling them names, excluding them, laughing of them or hurting them repeatedly?* The item was used to perceive representations of pupils about motives (of acting) of the perpetrators in bullying situations. Bullies can hurt other children by addressing them mean words or by calling them names, by pursuing to exclude them from social groups or social situations using mocking, intimidation, laughing at them when they are not telling a joke, or physically hitting them. The collected responses were grouped in a configuration of characteristics related to bullying reasoning, as they matched the profile of the dominance stereotype, the popularity stereotype or the provocative victim stereotype.

   Therefore, two stereotype categories were been delimitated**: dominance stereotype,** integrating the matching tags *power, affirmation, intimidation, superiority* and **popularity stereotype** with tags such as: *funny, slick, smart, trying to impress others*.

Figure no 3: Chart percentage of the perceived motivation of the bully

Analysis of the results of dominance and popularity stereotypes indicates (see Figure no. 3) that one can observe how the responders perceived reasons for the perpetrator's actions - either as the need for dominance (43%) or the need of popularity (42%). These findings suggest that some children tend to victimize others in order to impose themselves through dominance or to gain popularity. Regarding representations invoking the dominance stereotype and popularity stereotype, data were found to be distributed evenly in relation to gender, which, it could be concluded, that as many boys opting for *dominance* as a representation of bullying reason, so are girls.

From the group that perceived the **victim as provocative** for harassment (14% of the total group) 67% of respondents who believed that the victim was to be blamed were boys and the remaining 33% were girls (12 of 101). They presumed that the victim is responsible for being in some way an easy target because of the look, or some distinct psychical or behavioral characteristics (clumsiness, being overweight, wearing bracelets or glasses etc).

3. Discussion

Some representations about the victim features, were in some respects correlated to parenting styles or seemed to indicate that the victim had certain specific features that make him or her vulnerable to the machinations of a bully. Bully victims represent a high-risk group that tends to develop negative internal beliefs about themselves as persons, associated with fear, insecurity and powerlessness. They believed that they could not manage themselves or meet challenges such as managing a conflict, coping

with negative emotions, overcoming the aggression, especially in the case of children raised by hyper-protective mothers. A possible reasoning is that the victim did not indulge to be a victim, but the background set the child up to be as, if raised by a hyper-protective mom. This deficiency in terms of coping style is increasing the risk for anxiety and depression as well as for becoming a victim (Perry et al., 2001).

In a previous study we were investigating the connection between the probability of one *being a victim of bullying* and *family type* exponents. The most salient factor was found to be having a family with both parents absent, followed by one with the father absent (Tocai S. & Chipea, 2015). Former results on bullying research subscribe to the chances of one being a victim increased for children who expose specific negative patterns of behavior. Children who were familiar to the role of being a victim of bullying reported that *short stature*, *lower age*, *submissiveness, the inability to engage with other peers, passive play, low self-esteem* were traits identified by and then pursued by attackers (Boulton, Underwood, 1992; Schwartz et. al 2001). Social isolation also could be harmful for a victim, who could be doomed to not have a chance to practice social interactions and develop communication competence. Feeling bad, humiliated and depressed, increased the probability of being victimized, therefore a dangerous spiral is created.

A special category to take into consideration inside bullying pursuit, was that of those who held the belief that the victim in fact was the culprit. In this particular setting, respondents reason that bullies and some bystanders blamed the victim for his/her provocative traits which were thought to be the triggers for the aggressor to pick on a given victim.

Therefore, results of this study indicate that victims of bullying were perceived to be **vulnerable, weak, isolated, fearful individuals** in eyes of other pupils, and that these traits were easily noted by others targeting individuals for bullying and harassment.

Perception about the perpetrator
Interpretation of the data trended to show a stereotypical abuser in search of affirmation with other associated stereotyped traits, such as the victim being a catalyst. However, for readers would be wise to take into consideration the small sample size before generalizing. There are some theories that foreshadow similar interpretations to the findings and serve as models to approximate a bully's status but doing that here would be an interpretive stretch. Several well-known studies dedicated to learning models support the power of social influence in perpetuating any kind of behavior. This model is based on the **conditional operant learning** premises (Sherman, 1964; Skinner, 1953; Gewirtz, 1968 all cited in Bandura 1977).

One of the opening discussion premise is the **achievement of a social reward** that could function as a goal to the instrumental bullying model, whereas the humiliation and the intimidation of the victim served the perpetrator as an instrumental manner; namely, acquiring status within the

school group. More specifically, if the perpetrator was rated as popular, powerful, or funny, then the bullying attitude might be rewarded and perpetuated - this in order to maintain the role and to gain more popularity among peers. This might be a potential **conditioning mechanism** underlying the action of bullying, so that the attention given to the bully maintains his/her behavior as a payoff. Even though, the achievement of a social status and power are some short-term reinforcements, some perpetrators seemed to chase it no matter what, even if they were sometimes confronted with negative outcome, and eventually with social rejection. This statement emphasizes that **gaining attention** no matter how is more important than the harm of being hit, than the risk of being negatively perceived or than being ignored by others, where in this situation a bully, and so as the victim, is using her/his status as an instrument for seeking attention. The great psychological benefit to bullying, says Kochenderfer et.al (2008), is that bullies feel powerful, in control, and they engage in bullying as a way of gaining status.

       Attributional bias is another issue related to aggression or bullying. Longitudinal studies on bullying perpetrators state that these individuals seemed to be locked into an aggressive and hostile pattern, which at first were very rewarding for them (Schwartz, 2001). Aggressive children tended to focus on hostile signals and, more so, they often tend to attribute hostile and aggressive intent to others (Milich & Dodge, 1984).

       The need to dominate through intimidation was, at its core, related to the need of control that aggressors may have felt. Perpetrators sometimes need to control the environment to feel safe, because they themselves may live in disruptive families, or because of their own insecure and disorganized attachment styles. Gini (2006) advanced the **macho stereotype** as a social mechanism observed in 15% - 20% of children in his studies. Perpetrators rejected victims, as reported, due to their behalf about victim weaknesses. So are victims who admired the perpetrator for his or her outstanding power and/or popularity which they lack for. The macho status expressed through aggression is linked to the existing evidence that suggests that young people who engage in acts of bullying are also more likely to engage in acts of violence, beating other children or in sexual harassment (Espelage et al., 2000; Nansel et al., 2001). The effects for the perpetrator might have been greater, potentially involving the given society: they were found to develop criminal behaviors and to engage in acts of delinquency in greater numbers than other children as adults (Reid, 2003; Silvernail, 2000).

       However, a summary analysis of bullying motive debates, suggested that the pursuit of a status and esteem by perpetrators was supported only when related to the victim's condition of vulnerability and weakness. Another considerable amount of research consulted by the contemporary researchers in the field, led us to conclude that data are raising awareness to some extremely harmful consequences that the bully or the victim characters may predict, such as: lower self-esteem, bad school performance, bulimia, insomnia, anorexia and problems of mental health, depression, suicidal

ideation, anxiety, frustration, delinquency, criminality (Gladden et al. 2014; Silvernail, 2000). These effects were reported in a higher percentage of young people who identified themselves as victims of school bullying compared to those who do not so identify themselves.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study outline that children seeking social validation, in means to be appreciated by others as being powerful and feared, tended to assimilate as well as perpetuate, those behavior patterns in order to keep their social status. The existing reports conclude that perpetrators sometimes are using "short-term payoffs", therefore their aggression is instrumental. Punishing children, who bully, in order to help stomp out bullying, might increase their levels of stress, frustration or anxiety, leading to more disruptive behaviors. The driven idea is to re-educate the bully in order for him/her to achieve social and emotional competencies to tolerate stress, in order to develop responsibility, empathy and communication skills.

Some perpetrators are motivated in their bullying acts by perceived provocation. Trip et. al, (2015), discusses how expressed anger and aggressive behavior are associated with social skills deficits, poor anger management and depression. In their struggles, bullies are easily emotionally aroused, and they can't handle conflict. Therefore, cognitions, emotions and behaviors are interrelated and should be treated as so, in bullying prevention programs. Developing ways to copy with anger and distress is mandatory for bullies and not only for them.

Enhancing the ability to understand the reason for someone's action is an important key in helping bullying witnesses to take action. Last, but not least, helping the aggressor to better understand the victim is to teach how to put him or herself in the shoes of the victim, to achieve empathy. Meanwhile, understanding the reasons behind of the bullying acts might help the victim to be more aware of the resources he or she has (e.g. seeking help, developing assertiveness, enhancing tolerance to frustration etc.).

The number of the research studies and the national Romanian awareness programs to help prevent/stomp out bullying is rather small. The issues raised are not only near conceptual or methodological related, they also lack for strategic action policies and specialized human resources and community providers. Future actions will be needed *to understand, to prevent and stomp out this phenomenon* in order to move beyond these specific findings and to develop efficient and longways intervention strategies.

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