



Psychological impact of school bullying in adolescents: Moroccan school cases

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Abstract

School bullying is a set of intentional and repeated aggressive behaviors towards an individual where there is a real or perceived imbalance, and the victim feels vulnerable and powerless to protect themselves. This could be harmful and could lead to a pathological response, especially for those with a history of bullying.

This study is an observational cross-sectional survey of a sample of 150 adolescents ranging in age from 12 to 18 years old.

The results of this study allow us to better consider the problem of school bullying between peers, and the pathological impact this can have, both in the short and long term.

Keywords: Bullying, school, adolescents, psychotraumatism, Morocco

Introduction

Bullying is a serious problem affecting many children and adolescents. It is characterized by repeated, long-term negative actions by one or more students towards a fellow student. These actions can include violence, isolation and premeditated harassment.

Adolescence is a pivotal period marked by great psychic vulnerability, when the individual is in search of differentiation and individuation. Adolescents need psychic resources to manage their emotions and internal conflicts. Bullying can disrupt this identity-building process, creating trauma and suffering.

Methods

Our study aims to explore and evaluate the different dimensions of psychotraumatic impact in 150 adolescents, associated with harassment considered as psychotrauma per se (symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, symptoms of dissociation, somatization, comorbidities, etc...) as a

pathological response to a stressful life event perceived as traumatic. Our participants were randomly recruited from public and French mission middle and high schools in the cities of Rabat and Casablanca, as well as from consultants in the child psychiatry department at the Arrazi University Psychiatric Hospital in Sale, Morocco.

The consents were provided by the participants and their tutors.

Inclusion criteria

- French- or English-speaking adolescents
- Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18
- Adolescents attending Moroccan public or private schools, or French mission schools.

Exclusion criteria

- Schools with a rigorous and well-established anti-bullying policy.

Results

Table 1: Socio-demographic data of study participants

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Female	85	56
Male	65	44
Age		
12 – 14 years	71	47
14 – 16 years	44	30
16 – 18 years	35	23
School category		
Public	60	40
Private	60	40
French mission School	30	20
Socio economic level		
Low	25	16
Middle	113	75
High	12	9
History of school bullying		
Yes	123	82
No	27	
Forms of bullying		
Social exclusion	52.5	35

Physical bullying	69	46
Sexual bullying and cyberbullying	66	44
More than one form of bullying	52	34

Discussion

Of our 150 participants, 56% were female. The 12 to 16 age group was the most represented, with a percentage of 78%, against 22% aged between 16 and 18 years old. The percentage of adolescents enrolled in public and private schools was identical, at 40% each, and 20% of our participants were enrolled in a French mission. As for the socio-economic level of the families from which these adolescents come, it was qualified as moderate to high in 83% of cases. Only 18% of teenagers said they had never experienced bullying at school. Of the 123 adolescents who reported ever having been bullied at school, 25 were bullied by a single individual, 46 were bullied by a group of peers, and the remaining 52 were bullied by both a single individual and a group of peers. The forms of bullying were exclusion from a group in 35% of cases, physical aggression in 46%, sexual harassment and cyberbullying in 44%. It should be noted that 31% of teenagers reported being victims of multiple forms of harassment combined.

In 51% of our participants, i.e. half the sample, psychological disorders were found: sleep disturbances in 43% of cases, feelings of traumatic reliving in 51% of cases, feelings of guilt and shame in 60% of cases, lowered self-esteem in 38% of adolescents, and difficulties in concentrating with academic decline in 42% of cases. These symptoms lasted for more than a month in 24% of adolescents, with significant negative repercussions on the various facets of their daily lives. Absenteeism from school was noted in 24% of teenagers, justified by the eviction of harassers; problematic use of psychoactive substances, including cannabis, tobacco, e-cigarettes, alcohol and benzodiazepines in 10% of cases; the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder prompted psychiatric treatment in 17% of cases, while 82% would never have dared to seek help for their psychotrauma.

Our results are in line with the scientific literature. Indeed, in a study by S.Suresh *et al.* [1], of 169 middle and high school students in 2 cities, Chennai and Bengaluru, in southern India, 74.6% of bullying victims were aged between 10 and 16, compared with 26% aged between 16 and 18. Solberg and Olweus assert that bullying is characterized by 3 main criteria: aggressive behavior or "intent to harm the victim", which involves undesirable negative actions; the repetitive nature of the harassment, which is perpetuated over time; an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power and strength between the victim and the bully. According to Beaty and Alexeyev, types of bullying include direct bullying (behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting and stealing), indirect verbal bullying (having exclusively a psychological and non-physical impact), physical bullying (hitting, kicking, destroying property, enlisting a friend/peer to assault someone for the targeted person, relational or social bullying (non-physical: threatening or obscene gestures, social exclusion, threatening text messages or letters), and finally sexual bullying [2].

Cyberbullying has emerged as a new form of harassment, coinciding with advances in technology. Admittedly, it is not as common as traditional harassment, but its prevalence is gradually increasing in every corner of the world. Social

networks have greatly contributed to the spread of this scourge, and sometimes it combines with other forms of harassment, leading to adverse consequences such as the use of tobacco, drugs and alcohol, psychological disorders including sleep disorders, suicide attempts; having been found to be strongly correlated with bullying in several studies (McKinnon *et al.* 2016; Moore *et al.* 2017; Miranda-Mendizabal) [3, 4, 5, 6]. In light of this research, it is concluded that school bullying has profound consequences on the mental health of adolescents [7, 8]. It is essential to raise awareness and take action to prevent and deal with this problem. The role of the school in preventing and combating bullying is one of the key areas of prevention. It must make students, teachers and parents aware of the consequences of harassment, by organizing workshops, seminars and awareness campaigns to promote a respectful and caring environment.

In addition, schools must develop clear anti-harassment policies and communicate them to all members of the school community; and put in place procedures for reporting, investigating and dealing with cases of harassment [9]. Teachers and staff must be trained to recognize the signs of harassment and intervene appropriately. They need to know how to support victims and manage conflicts between students, offering psychological and emotional support to victims of harassment. They can set up discussion groups, counselors or mediators, or even have a psychologist assigned to the school. Schools must also monitor interactions between students and intervene quickly in the event of harassment. They need to create a climate of trust where students feel comfortable reporting incidents.

Conclusion

It's clear that bullying is far from a trivial event, but rather a dyadic relationship between the bully and the victim. School bullying has many persistent social consequences that could worsen over time, which is why we need to pay more attention to implementing anti-bullying policies in schools from primary onwards.

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