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The Netherlands

Bullying and victimization in schools in India

Thakkar, N.

Citation

Thakkar, N. (2021, December 21). *Bullying and victimization in schools in India*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247333>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

CHAPTER ONE

General Introduction

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about bullying behaviors in India. Olweus (1993) defines bullying as an act of repetitive physical or psychological aggression by an individual, or a group, over another. A principle feature that is also part of the definition is the recognition that there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, where the aggressor is generally more powerful than the victim (Olweus, 1997; Thornberg, 2015). This imbalance of power can be studied under the light of within-person (individual) traits, in relation to social contexts that create dissimilarities between-persons (group dynamics) (Rigby, 2004). It also can be studied focusing on the interaction between the person characteristics and contextual characteristics.

Traditional theories for understanding bullying and victimization in the classroom have focused on the individual level attributes that lead to bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993; Sutton et al., 2001). For instance, a bully has been characterized as one who is aggressive and destructive, and asserts dominance over others (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009), whereas a victim is one who is passive, submissive, or weak (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). However, besides individual-level attributes, past research has also indicated a growing need to study bullying in relation to a broader socio-cultural context (Jansen et al., 2016), where bullying behavior occurs as a result of different levels of power that exist within social groups (Rigby, 2004).

The need for understanding bullying behaviors through a contextual perspective is in line with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This model suggests that symbiotic layers of systems exist, like that of an individual's personality that is embedded within their school climate (microsystem). These are further layered within cultural and societal norms, and reciprocally influence and co-construct each other through a mutual exchange between the interlinked layers.

Little attention, however, has been given to the understanding of these dynamics with respect to bullying behaviors (Rigby, 2004; Jansen et al., 2016), particularly so in India (Smith et al., 2018).

Expanding on context, below we present a conceptual and theoretical framework to explore and understand socio-cultural components of India, and then examine its association with bullying and victimization in school-going adolescents given the contextual reference.

The Indian Context

In contrast to the relative abundance of studies on bullying in Western countries, there is a paucity of research on the topic of bullying from India. India is a vast country, comprising 29 states and seven union territories. It is the second most populous country in the world that accommodates an adolescent population of nearly 236 million, approximately 36% of the world's youth population (Census, 2011). While Hindi is the national language, there are 22 other officially recognized languages (Census, 2011), with distinct scripts and literature, and multiple dialects to add to the heterogeneity. Furthermore, India celebrates multi-religious diversity (Ganguly, 2003), but also struggles with a deep-rooted caste system (Deshpande, 2001; Nambissan, 2009). To illustrate, we expand on some aspects of caste, religion, and cultural norms and attitudes in India below.

Although casteism in India has been banned by the India constitution, it continues to be an important factor of social identity in India (Sharma, 2012). The caste-based system in India is believed to have historically stemmed approximately 1500 years ago, from Laws of Manu where individuals were classified into separate *Varnas* or "Castes", based on their *dharma* or obligatory family occupation/profession. The four original *Varnas* were: *Brahman*- priests, *Kshatriya*- warriors, *Vaishya*- traders, and *Shudras*- menial jobs, e.g., sweepers (Deshpande, 2001). Although the system may have been

formed initially as discrete and mutually exclusive ‘occupation-specific categories’, the caste system created hierarchies and evolved into a rank-order system during the British colonial rule (Sharma, 2012) with a distance between the “upper” caste, being the Brahmans, and “lower” caste, being the Shudras. Furthermore, a connotation of “pure” and “polluted” came to be assigned to these castes over time, where higher caste individuals were considered purer (both physically as well as spiritually), whereas the lower castes were considered more polluted (Gupta, 2000). For example, the custom of “Untouchability” existed, where lower caste individuals who were scavengers, sweepers, drain cleaners or performed other menial or “dirty” labor, were considered unhygienic and impure. “Touching” a lower-caste person would “pollute” the dharma (*dharma-brashth*) of a higher caste individual. Higher caste individuals would then have to take a bath and pray, to “cleanse” them self of the impurity (Gupta, 2000). Practices like having separate water facilities or wells for the *untouchables*, or not allowing them in temples to avoid pollution of the sacred place, prevailed in the society. Additionally, there existed sub-castes subsumed under the four major castes, and discrimination and exclusiveness *within* sub-groups was common practice (Deshpande, 2000). Around the time of India’s Independence in 1947, mass scale movements to end the caste system were endeavored, whereby the affirmative action program came into existence - a system of “reservation”, where 22.5% of all government jobs, electoral constituency, or educational seats were reserved for individual from lower castes (Deshpande, 2000). With this, the caste system was collapsed into “General” caste, or “scheduled” caste and tribe, or “other backward class” (OBC) categories instead of the previous hierarchical classification. The constitution of India written at the time of Independence included this program, such that (broadly) caste-based segregations was banished and deemed a punishable offense, and- the “scheduled” (or other backward) castes and tribes in India would have reserved benefits to compensate for the discrimination over the years that socially predisposed them to future positions of disadvantage, as compared

to higher caste families (Deshpande, 2001). Nevertheless, generations of division and inequality, that had been deep-rooted in the Indian society (Nambissan, 2009), left a *residual* structural distance and angst between individuals from lower and upper caste. Upper caste individuals (now, “General” caste) argue that the reservation system leads to unfair discrimination and benefits several privileges to the lower caste individuals (now, scheduled caste, tribe, or other backward class) (Deshpande, 2001). Even today, parents from upper caste are uncomfortable when their children come in close contact with lower caste peers, let alone play with them. Even teachers at school are prejudiced against lower caste students while showing favoritism towards higher caste students (Neelakandan & Patil, 2012). Given this structural distance between people of different castes, bullying and aggression between, and within, people of different castes is a historically and normatively acknowledged part of the society in India (Jaishankar, 2009).

While caste presents a unique challenge through hierarchical structures in India, the diversity of India with respect to religion also adds to groupism and imbalance of power. Religious bullying is a normatively accepted and habituated practice in India (Erum, 2018; Campbell et al., 2018). For example, Sikh children, who wear turbans, are disproportionately bullied in schools on account of their appearance with jokes implicating that they are slow-witted (Froystad, 2013), thus, rendering Sikh students more vulnerable to being bullied in schools. Additionally, there exists an ideological and cultural distance between Hindus and Muslims in India, where each has a separate social identity from the other (Froystad, 2013), a view indoctrinated among children as well. Consequently, Hindu children commonly bully Muslim children (Erum, 2018), and vice versa, reflecting how broad socio-cultural, religious inclusion and exclusion norms in India shape interaction between peers. Erum (2018) indicates that in cases of religious bullying, children “learn to cope with it on their own”, while parents and teachers dismiss it as “harmless banter” and thus most incidents go unreported.

It follows an acquiescence attitude regarding bullying among students, i.e., there is an apathetic acceptance of cultural divides, resulting in a failure to recognize and acknowledge bullying behavior and a reluctance to act upon it (Campbell et al., 2018), thereby influencing interpersonal dynamics and bullying behaviors in class. Such religious divides, attitudes, and practices in India may play a role in normalizing bullying behavior in classrooms, making it a part of a youth's identity and daily life experiences.

The diversity, population density, combined with disparities and inequalities co-existing in India between cultures and also within the sub-groups of particular cultures, have been recognized as unique to the Indian setting (Panda & Gupta, 2004). Thus, it is questionable to assume homogeneity in culture within India, let alone, consider the Indian culture congruent to high-income western countries, where most research on bullying comes from. The hierarchies in India drive social behavior over and above individual characteristics and play a role in creating power imbalances among adolescents, a factor that is considered a precursor to victimization (Olweus, 1997). Furthermore, Prakash (2003) highlights that India, being a collectivistic society recognizes an individual *not* based on their personal characteristics or achievements, but on the context of the individual like his/her family, caste, place, or institution. This notion is in line with the contextual-development perspective (Chen & French, 2008) that suggests that in collectivistic countries like India, context is more likely to influence evaluations of socially acceptable behavior and experiences, rather than individual attributes.

Given the aforementioned historically established and long-standing cultural divides, and the general lack of indigenous bullying research in India, it is crucial that bullying be studied specifically in India. Bullying and its consequences have been recognized in India, and a growing need to examine the factors associated with bullying in school has been expressed (Khatri & Kupersmidt, 2003; Pells et al., 2016). Reports

indicate that not only is bullying sizably prevalent in India (Nguyen et al., 2017; Ramya & Kulkarni, 2011), but also the reasons behind bullying in India could be attributed to the socio-cultural inequalities in caste, religion, SES, or skin color (Srisiva et al., 2013). The second chapter to this thesis presents a systematic review of past literature on bullying from India.

Systematic Review

Scientifically, among the preliminary steps to conducting research, one requirement is an initial thorough review of past literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Given the diversity of India, past literature has led to uncertain or inconsistent answers for prevalence estimates of bullying behaviors, risk-factors, consequences, or interventions (Malhi et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2017; Ramya & Kulkarni, 2011), signaling towards a need to review and synthesize all available evidence in these domains. This thesis includes a systematic review process following guidelines as provided by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) to perform a research synthesis of bullying and victimization behaviors in India. We draw attention to relevant scientifically sound past research, chiefly focusing on the (a) methodological characteristics of included studies, (b) prevalence estimates of bullying behavior, (c) forms of bullying, (d) risk factors, and (e) consequences of bullying in India. Through this chapter, we also specifically examine the psychometric properties of the instruments adopted in the included studies, as well as methodological characteristics including design and data collection, sample size and sampling procedures of the included studies, and characteristics of bullying behavior distinctive to the Indian context.

The influence of systematic reviews has increasingly expanded as potential users have become more familiar with this approach of dealing with the information mountain, thus refining large amounts of research information into a manageable form (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Furthermore, another benefit of this method for

the researcher lies in the potential to allow designing subsequent steps to a study, or formulate hypotheses in due course, through a transparent and potentially unbiased foundation by collating all relevant scientifically sound research, rather than single studies that could be screened selectively to fit a chosen directional theory (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014). Additionally, systematic reviews allow future researchers with the ease of replicability of the study (Egger et al., 2001), thereby providing not only a formal summary of available information, but also a basis for the next pool of researchers from India to use chapter 2 of this dissertation as a stepping stone to further their knowledge in the field of bullying behaviors.

General Method of Empirical Chapters in the Current Study

The chapters presented in this thesis share an underlying theme of highlighting bullying and victimization behaviors among school-going adolescents in India. However, multiple methodological improvements in the empirical chapters 3, 4, and 5 in the present dissertation add value to this area of research as compared to earlier studies from India as well as globally.

Longitudinal Research

Of the 37 studies that were included in the systematic review in the present dissertation, only two were longitudinal studies on the topic of bullying and victimization in India; one by Nguyen et al. (2017), and the second one is a study published in this thesis (Chapter 3). The other, 35 studies were cross-sectional. Cross-sectional studies can establish adolescents' functioning at a specific time point and investigate which characteristics or contexts are associated with particular bullying behaviors and outcomes at that time point. Cross-sectional designs cannot examine change, and predictors for change, thus rendering ineffective in assessing risk factors that precede bullying behaviors, or consequences that follow them, in a classroom environment. Longitudinal studies help disentangle antecedents and consequents, to estimate the

inter-individual variability in intra-individual (or within-person) patterns of change (Curran et al., 2010), allowing investigations of the sequence of occurrence of bullying with its risks and outcomes. The present study allows for longitudinal observations. Data presented in this dissertation was collected over three time-points in a school year, with a gap of three months between each wave of data collection.

Multiple Informant Approach

Self-reports are frequently used in the study of bullying and victimization, because it is an easily applied and relatively efficient method for collecting information about personal experiences (McDonald, 2008). However, in combination with other self-reports, self-reported measures of bullying may be confounded because of shared method variance that may cause the effect sizes in such studies to be inflated (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Shared method variance refers to the exaggeration in correlation between two constructs when they are measured by the same method, and is one of the most common limitations in behavioral research (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Van Geel et al. (2016), in addition, show that in studies on bullying behaviors, peer-reports have been underused. In the present study, the constructs of bullying and victimization are measured using peer-reports as well as self-reports, assuring better validity of the constructs measured. Another key advantage of peer-reports is that scores are based on multiple informants, thus decreasing measurement error and providing a more reliable result (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2009). Salmivalli et al. (1996) in their study on bullying as a group process, reported that peer-estimation procedures are better identifiers of victims as compared to self-estimation procedures. They argued that victims tend to deny their situation in self-reports, owing to a “self-serving attribution bias”: individuals make attributions that preserve their self-perceptions and protect their self-esteem. Besides, with self-rating procedures there is a chance that adolescents may be hesitant in reporting their aggressive behavior due to cultural disapproval or the negative connotations that come along with being labeled a “bully”

(Salmivalli et al., 1996). Also, the risk of potential punitive repercussions may play a role (Branson & Cornell, 2009). Contrastingly, adolescents may also be tempted to scale up or overestimate their good behavior in self-reports to indulge in social desirability and be recognized for prosocial “positive” traits (Salmivalli et al., 1996). These limitations of self-reports and the advantages of peer-reports on bullying promoted the simultaneous use of self-reports and peer-reports in the study of bullying in the present research.

Psychopathy and Bullying

Following the systematic review, the focus turns towards socio-cultural factors as well as individual attributes that contribute towards bullying behaviors, in chapter 3. The intention behind bullying is recognized by studies as an individual’s need to assert dominance among peers, and to enjoy social standing and popularity within the classroom (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009), driven by status goals and a quest for power and aggression. Fanti and Kimonis (2013) suggest that the differential associations between specific dimensions of psychopathy and bullying versus victimization could be attributed to youth characteristics, where impulsive adolescents are more prone to hasty decisions and actions that places them at risk for harm, targets of dominance and easy victims, whereas adolescents who are characterized by narcissistic tendencies like social dominance, entitlement, and willingness to exploit others are more likely to engage in bullying perpetration. Psychopathy in the field of bullying and youth can be studied as a three-dimensional approach that is characterized by traits of narcissism, callous-unemotionality (CU) and impulsivity (Van Baardewijk et al., 2010). Narcissism refers to a grandiose sense of self-worth, dishonest or superficial charm and manipulation for personal gain. Callous-unemotionality (CU) comprises of traits of callousness, unemotionality and lack of remorse and empathy, while impulsivity concerns irresponsible and thrill-seeking behavior (Van Baardewijk et al., 2010). We thus investigate whether the dimensions of psychopathy contribute unique variance

in predicting bullying and victimization cross-sectionally as well as longitudinally. We also examine whether psychopathy dimensions differentiate between roles in bullying (i.e., bully, victim, bully victim, and uninvolved group). Global research has established that bullying is related to acute psychological and physical difficulties for all persons involved: victims, bullies, and observers, with even worse consequences observed among bully-victims, i.e., adolescents who both bully others and are bullied by others (Cook et al., 2010), calling attention to this area of research.

In this chapter, we also study if the sociodemographic constructs of age, SES, caste, and religion present unique strength in predicting an individual's bullying behavior, thereby investigating the cultural interference (Charak & Koot, 2015) in the associations between adolescent's personality and bullying roles. Furthermore, inconsistent reports from past studies indicate a conflicting gender component, where some studies note a higher prevalence of bullying perpetration among boys (Nguyen et al., 2017), whereas others report no association between gender and bullying roles (Nambiar et al., 2020). Given this, we also include gender as a covariate in this study.

Body Mass Index and Bullying Victimization

Chapter 3 on the associations between individuals' attributes and cultural constructs with bullying behaviors can be seen as a study bringing the context to the fore. The next chapter, chapter 4, presents a more structural perspective. It examines a transactional model of influence between the Body Mass Index (BMI) of an individual and victimization experiences. Across the world, there has been an increase in the prevalence of obesity among school-going children (Li et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Once considered a challenge among developed and affluent nations, obesity and overweight have today turned into a global epidemic where it is becoming more common among developing countries like India as well (Yang et al., 2019). Global research suggests that being obese or overweight among youth is associated with a torrent of adverse

physical, psychosocial, and psychological consequences (Li et al., 2020). Past research has shown concurrent associations between adolescent's body mass index (BMI) and classroom bullying victimization experiences (Waasdorp et al., 2018), however, it remains unclear whether an increased BMI leads to more experiences of victimization or whether victimization experiences, on the contrary, increase the likelihood of weight gain (Adams & Bukowski, 2008; Lee & Vaillancourt, 2018). Chapter 4 goes beyond uni- and bi-directional effects of BMI and victimization, and investigates a reciprocal-effect (Sameroff, 2009). We study whether an increased BMI predicts victimization experiences over time, which in turn predicts further increase in BMI in a circular capacity, and vice versa. The premise of this study follows the concept that associations between individual attributes change, maintain, and then change again depending on complex interactions and interdependence between individuals, their experiences, and their social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Sameroff, 2009). The study exemplifies that simple predictive formulations focusing entirely on the context of variables do not always help determine the dynamism or the structure of the relationships in social sciences. Given which, transactional models are of significant importance to locate the continuity and directionality of the recursive processes under observation (Meunier et al., 2010), in this case, bullying behaviors. Thus, this chapter seeks to extend existing research by focusing on cross-lagged, recursive, influences of BMI and victimization experiences in a longitudinal framework to detect subtle as well as complex concurrent, uni-directional, and bi-directional associations within individuals as well as between adolescents within a classroom.

Socio-economic Status (SES) within Classroom and Self-perceptions of SES

As stated earlier, India is a country of stark contrasts and inequalities (Sinha et al., 2010), and this is particularly evident in the distance between the high and low socio-economic status of India. This inequality in economic status influences customs

and practices of child-care and development, that consequently affect interactions between children in the school environment (Bapat, 2016). For example, children from lower SES are expected to assist in chores at home like cooking, cleaning, or filling water for its use at home from the closest water-pump/well/facility, because a continuous running supply of water is usually not accessible to the low-income households (Nambissan, 2009). Likewise, materialistic resources like electric supply at home, hygiene and sanitation, cars, and internet or technology access are also unequally available to children, based on the family's SES in India. Furthermore, circumstantial differences in daily lives of youth due to SES inequality, dispense some groups of children at positions of responsibility of bringing money into the house by taking up paid labor jobs (Bapat, 2016), while the economically content youth focus on academic excellence, thus affecting school attendance, academic competency, and interpersonal relationship among youth within the class environment. It follows that material wealth and resources are indicators of the *context* of the youth, which work favorably or unfavorably in their stride, and lead to structural group dynamics that may be precursors to bullying and victimization. An illustration of this is noted by Nambissan (2009), who reports that children from a particular SES tend to socialize among the same SES class. For instance, children who come from the "basti" (slums) are friends with the other *basti* girls alone, while girls who reside in "colony" (indicating higher income households) tend to connect with other *colony* girls. Furthermore, "colony" people would sit in the front rows in a classroom and be labeled as more "*hoshiyaar*" (intelligent) by the teachers whereas "basti" youth would sit at the back. One may assume that these inequalities and dissimilarities, that create a power imbalance between groups, influence peer interaction in the classroom environment in India. Chapter 5 presents an elaborate view into the dynamics of SES and the context of that SES status within classrooms.

After chapters 2 to 5 this thesis concludes with a general discussion. It presents

a summary of results and key reflections on the findings from the preceding chapters. We close with limitations of the studies reported in this dissertation, and discuss implications as well as directions for future research.