



Universiteit
Leiden

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

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3247333>

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

CHAPTER SIX

General Discussion

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to provide an overview of bullying and victimization behaviors, focusing on literature from previous studies, individual characteristics, and contextual influences among Indian school-going youth. This dissertation contains a systematic review of research on bullying and bully victimization in India. This partly formed the basis for three chapters reporting results from a large, longitudinal study in which we presented students aged 11 to 19 years old with a comprehensive battery of questionnaires consisting of self- as well as peer-reported estimates, at three time-points in a school year. These chapters focus on the deconstruction of associations between socio-cultural background, individual characteristics, bullying and victimizations processes, and classroom contexts. The records were used to differentiate students between bullies, victims, or bully-victim categories, as well as to study unique and group contributions in predicting bullying and victimization outcomes on a continuous scale. The studies investigated cross-sectional as well as over time dynamics among a diverse group of Indian adolescents from distinct socioeconomic backgrounds, castes, religions, and age groups ($M_{age} = 13.01$, $SD = 1.15$). The present study ensured careful handling of missing responses, further establishment of psychometric properties of the original and translated versions of the instruments used, and complex and robust analysis techniques. This thesis presents several significant contributions to advance our understanding in the field of bullying and victimization, especially in the Indian context.

6

Scope of Bullying Research in India

There is a wealth of comprehensive literature from western countries that examines the topic of bullying and its correlates both, cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Elgar et al., 2015). However, research from India on this topic is scant.

To give a glimpse into the problem, for chapter 2, the systematic review, we had run a database search in April 2019 on PubMed for “USA and bullying” vs “India and bullying”, and found that for every 30 hits for studies in USA on bullying, there was 1 hit for the same in India. The population of India is now close to 1.4 billion, making it the second most populous country in the world. The country accommodates an adolescent population of nearly 253 million that accounts for almost one-fifth of the country’s total population, and the largest adolescent population by country in the world, inhabiting almost 36% of the world’s youth population (UNFPA, 2014; UNICEF, 2019a). Despite these figures, research on bullying among adolescents from India is strikingly limited, as compared to studies conducted on bullying globally. The present study advocates that with meaningful investment in research and access to resources, there is a promising opportunity in social and behavioral sciences research to yield a welcome transformation in the scope and understanding of youth behaviors in India.

Chapter 2 highlights that overall the conclusions drawn from the included studies are comparable to western literature. In India bullying perpetration was found to be prevalent among 7% to 31% as per the included studies, while bullying victimization estimates ranged between 9% to 80% (Kshirsagar et al., 2007; Maji et al., 2016; Thakkar et al., 2020). Victimized youth face adverse cognitive and physical consequences like anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, school phobia, vomiting, catastrophizing, self-blaming, or sleep disturbances (Kshirsagar et al., 2007; Maji et al., 2016), while bully-victims are more likely to struggle with behavioral problems and academic difficulties (Malhi et al., 2014; Sarkhel et al., 2006). Furthermore, the systematic review shows that not only is past literature on this topic from India scarce, but also based on the quality of existing research, we recognize great capacity of improvement in terms of methodological rigor, data collection processes and instrumentation, use of sophisticated statistical approaches, and presentation of the findings in future studies. The vast adolescent population of India provides ample opportunity and resources

within India, as well as internationally, to further our understanding in the field of bullying. Use of longitudinal designs in particular to study the topic will add to the understanding of antecedents and consequents of bullying (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Validation studies to provide standardized instruments and assessments for the Indian population need to be developed, and a multiple-informant approach to achieve a global assessment of bullying behavior should be followed (Branson & Cornell, 2009). Cultural replication and cross validation studies to ascertain the generalizability, and applicability of previous findings from India is necessitated.

Main Findings from Empirical Studies

In the present study, we started with the hypothesis in chapter 3 that associations between bullying and psychopathy as found in western studies (Fanti & Kimonis, 2013; Van Geel et al., 2017), would be replicated in India. Research on associations between psychopathy and bullying have significant implications (Van Geel et al., 2017), and yet to the best of our knowledge and from Chapter 2, we note that no prior longitudinal studies have been conducted in India to study this relationship. For individual personality characteristics of psychopathy subdimensions, namely, narcissism, callous-unemotionality (CU), and impulsivity, and its associations with bullying behaviors, chapter 3 found that the collective constellation of psychopathy performs better in predicting bullying behaviors in classroom as opposed to the individual subscale traits of psychopathy. This is in line with past research where it has been found that all subdimensions of psychopathy, added cumulatively, contribute to form a broader syndrome that predicts youth behavior like bullying and victimization, better than independent dimensions or traits (Lilienfeld, 2018). The results of the current study thus reaffirm that for predicting bullying and bully victimization it is best to use all scales of psychopathy (Salekin, 2016).

For the covariates of gender, caste, and religion, chapter 3 shows significant

associations in predicting the likelihood of children being a bully or victim. These findings, however, were not consistent across each time-point for the self- and the peer-reported scales. Thus, we do not conclude that there is a direct pathway from these socio-cultural variables to bullying and victimization. Nonetheless, we alert future researchers of the socio-cultural interference of contextual components in India. Several circumstantial, societal, and cultural adversities may be possible sources of problem behavior in India (Smith et al., 2018), as also suggested by the social-push hypothesis (Ray et al., 2016), which implies that individual characteristics predict problem behaviors more assuredly in contexts that are less harmful. In this light, chapter 3 proposes that in the study of bullying and psychopathy, the negative impact of social adversities overshadow the predictive influence of psychopathy on bullying behaviors. Chapter 3 highlights that more prominent than the *direction* of associations between the covariates and bullying behaviors, or individual personality characteristics and bullying behaviors, is the contextual “noise” that surrounds these associations among Indian youth that requires further attention. Studies contextualizing the factors associated with bullying in India may contribute in designing effective, tailor-cut interventions for bullies with psychopathic traits.

Chapter 4 of the dissertation investigated concurrent, unidirectional, as well as bidirectional associations between Body Mass Index (BMI) and victimization experiences among adolescents in school. Bullying behaviors, as well as overweight and obesity, are commonly prevalent across the world (WHO, 2020). However, reported associations between these two constructs have been inconsistent in past studies (Adams & Bukowski, 2008; Janssen et al., 2004; Pearce et al., 2002, Lumeng et al., 2010). The present study yielded mainly and almost exclusively concurrent relations between BMI and victimization through a transactional model of analyses. Concurrent associations between weight status and victimization have been reported in several past studies as well (Van Geel et al., 2014), however, we add to previous literature on

associations between BMI and victimization (Janssen et al., 2004; Pearce et al., 2002) that in a longitudinal capacity there is no direction of influence from BMI to victimization or vice versa, i.e., not only does victimization play no role in predicting weight status over time, but neither does weight status predict odds of being victimized over time. A possible explanation is that peer encounters related to appearance are shaped by mediating factors like subjective perceptions of weight, body image, depressive symptoms and self-esteem, or psychosocial constructs of adjustment (Fox & Farrow, 2009; Giletta et al., 2010; Reulbach et al., 2013). It has been noted that the onset of adolescence is likely to trigger a high salience of body image and appearance (Reulbach et al., 2013), which may be of particular importance in shaping peer relationships at the sensitive age of adolescence. In line with this, past studies have indicated that it is the subjective perception of body weight, that makes children susceptible to different forms of victimization (Falkner et al., 2001), where overweight and obese children reported significantly more victimization than their non-overweight peers, however, global self-worth, self-esteem for physical appearance and body dissatisfaction each fully mediated the paths between weight status and victimization (Brixval et al., 2012; Fox & Farrow, 2009; Reulbach et al., 2013). We estimate that the non-significant longitudinal associations could thus point to these mediating factors playing a role in BMI and victimization associations in the present study.

Another likely explanation for the null-findings from the longitudinal data-analyses could be that associations between BMI and victimization cannot be easily and directly drawn from global findings in India. It has been observed that Indians have more abdominal obesity and excessive fat percentage, though they do not have high BMI (Banerji et al., 1999), as compared to other cultures. Also, beauty standards among Indian adolescents may not be the same as western countries, and thus, deviation from those standards may not directly lead to peer victimization in the Indian context. Moreover, binge eating is not a habit commonly observed among Indian adolescents.

For example, the Indian doctrine is that a good Hindu child would eat “vegetarian home-cooked meals”, while non-traditional “modern” food is perceived as a spoilt habit, where parents and elders criticize, discourage and even reprimand adolescents that indulge in outside fried, non-vegetarian or unhealthy meals (Wilson, 2010). Wilson (2010) further notes that the Hindu community in general is skeptical about modern ways of life. Thus, eating habits cannot be easily decoupled from other cultural contexts in India such as family affluence, social status, gender, religion and the interaction between them. These factors may further interfere with associations between BMI and peer victimization. The present study is one of the first studies to examine longitudinal associations between BMI and victimization with a group of Indian adolescents, and thus the possibility of comparative analyses is restricted. In summary, through chapter 4 we highlight that standalone concurrent associations between BMI and victimization were found to be significant as also seen in past research, however, the non-significant longitudinal associations could only be discovered and nuanced given the methodological design of the study.

The systematic review of past research as well as the findings from the empirical studies in the present dissertation implicated that context and self-perceptions, play a significant role in predicting bullying behaviors in India. Chapter 5 in the present dissertation focuses on the socio-economic status (SES) of an adolescent, the context of this status in their respective classroom, plus self-perceptions of adolescents sharing this context in classroom to examine bullying victimization outcomes. Additionally, in this chapter we employ a longitudinal mediated moderation design. Mediation implies cause and effect; a basic condition to be fulfilled in mediation analyses is that the cause precedes the effect (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010), thus requiring longitudinal data to observe the antecedents and consequents. However, few studies utilize a longitudinal mediation design (Maxwell & Cole, 2007). The optimized use of the longitudinal data in this thesis, addresses this concern. It was found that belonging

to a contextual minority group with respect to SES in a classroom (being low SES in a high- or middle-income classroom context or vice versa) indeed predicts more experiences of victimization in adolescents when measured cross-sectionally as well as over time. Moreover, longitudinal mediation analyses yielded that the associations between being a contextual SES minority and victimization experiences are mediated via perceptions of self as a minority. This indicates that in a growth model perspective, first comes the construct of objectively being high or low on a socio-economic spectrum which, secondly, would be linked to the recognition that an individual belongs to a socio-economic minority in a particular classroom context, followed by, thirdly, the perception of self as a minority in the respective context, and, fourthly and finally, the experience of victimization among adolescents. Looking at the first sequence of the association, it has been reported in past studies that lower SES children are predisposed to higher victimization experiences in general around the world (Due et al., 2009; Tippett & Wolke, 2014), as also in India (Sethi et al., 2019). For the second order of sequence, we find that not only is the objective measurement of SES significant in predicting bullying behaviors, but there is a significant implication in further breaking down the SES measure with regard classroom SES composition, or relative proportions of different SES levels within a classroom. This means that the subjective context plays a role in predicting victimization. Similar findings have been reported in past literature, where belonging to a minority group with regard to ethnicity, gender, or race within a classroom is found to be associated with experiences of victimization depending on the students' similarity or dissimilarity to those around them (Bellmore et al., 2004; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). We extend that this claim also stands true for the construct of SES where classroom SES compositions affect victimization behavior. Furthermore, a third key factor in this sequence of observations is that the contextual status of an adolescent predicts victimization through the construct of self-perception. The three chain links thus add up to the fourth outcome response, victimization. Consequently,

we establish through the present study that when students not only come from a less affluent background, but also when they are surrounded by a dissimilar context where peers are more affluent than them, and when the students thus perceive themselves as belonging to a minority, together this will best predict distinct victimization experiences in classroom.

Chapter 5 not only clarifies the time sequence of these associations, but also shows that the direction of these association changes over time. The growth model analysis showed that though baseline scores are predicted by contextual SES and mediated through self-perceptions, in the long run, minority status predicts victimization change over time in the negative direction. This means that longitudinally, being part of a minority in an Indian classroom predicts *less* victimization. Thus, despite the clarity in the mediated nature of the associations between SES and victimization, the “true” mediator, yet, does not stand out unequivocally in the present analyses. We suggest a possibility of multiple mediators (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) contributing towards or against victimization experiences in classroom contexts. Chapter 5 further emphasizes the need to examine antecedents and consequences of bullying behavior within contexts over time, to be able to observe not just cross-sectional association, but also prospective consistencies and change in victimization experiences through time as seen in chapter 5.

Implications and Future Directions

Importance of Multiple Informants

The majority of the studies included in the systematic review in chapter 2 made use of only one informant, i.e., self-reported data to estimate bullying behaviors among adolescents. However, as observed in the empirical studies in the present dissertation, for almost every association with bullying behaviors, there is a discrepancy in reports for self-reported assessments and those for peer-reported assessment. There is a

generally low to moderate agreement between self- and peer-reported estimates of bullying behaviors in past studies as well (Graham et al., 2003; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). For instance, a meta-analytic study on psychopathy and bullying found that for studies on CU traits and bullying, the effect sizes were higher for studies that used self-reports to measure bullying as opposed to studies that used peer-reports (Van Geel et al., 2017). We found in chapter 3 that while 6.3% to 7.7% students classified as bullies in our study on the self-reported scale, between 10.3% and 15.1% students qualified as bullies on the peer-reported scale. The peer-reported scale also yielded a higher percentage of victims as compared to the self-reported scale in chapter 3, with low correlations between the two reports on bully and victim categories. Similarly, Cornell and Brockenbrough (2004) found that only 15 students (4%) in their sample of 416 students identified themselves as frequent bullies but peer-reports provided a different picture where 77 students (19%) were nominated as bullies by two or more classmates. Also, past research has established that there is very little overlap between the two types of measures for bullying behaviors (Baly et al., 2014). Both, self- and peer-reports have advantages and are valid approaches, however, both are susceptible to certain biases, making neither more “superior” than the other (Gromann et al., 2011). Self-reports provide information directly from the source and are unique with regard to the responder’s perception (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2009). At the same time, they run the risk of being biased due to social desirability leading to under or over reporting of bullying behaviors (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Whereas, peer-reports are less subjective, but may end up providing incorrect information because of lack of information about the nominees. Self-reports of victimization have been found to be associated with negative adjustment outcomes and internalizing problems like depressed mood, anxiety, loneliness, and negative self-perceptions (Juvonen et al., 2001; Maji et al., 2016), whereas peer-reports are stronger in predicting status outcomes and interpersonal relationships associated with rejection and less acceptance in groups for victims and

bullies (Gromann et al., 2011). Furthermore, peer-reports more accurately provide a perspective from a larger group of direct observers (Gromann et al., 2011), decreasing measurement error and providing unbiased results (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2009). We thus conclude that self- and peer-reports yield a separate set of bullies and victims and thus advocate simultaneous use of both estimates in this area of research through the present dissertation.

The use of peer-reports thus supports construct validity in youth victimization studies as in the present study, representing an alternative to self-report findings in the study of bullying (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). The use of multiple informant approach in addition goes beyond the study of bullying to congregate to a broader implication in the field of adolescent and child mental health assessment in general (Kaurin et al., 2016). Traditional research has established that convergence, or agreement, between multiple informants provides a global assessment of functioning of the child (De Los Reyes et al., 2015). The combination approach further allows researchers to examine specific predictions about incremental and construct validity of the measurements used. We thus advocate using a multiple informant approach in a wide variety of emotional and behavioral problems, including bullying to overcome the above-mentioned limitations and capture best results (Baly et al., 2014; Branson & Cornell, 2009; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002).

Importance of Longitudinal Studies

The present dissertation throughout highlights that bullying and victimization among youth is not a static phenomenon that occurs at a single time point in an adolescents' developmental span. It rather is a dynamic and repetitive process that changes with complexities as adolescents' transition and develop socially and biologically (Swearer et al., 2017). The majority of past studies from India are cross-sectional in nature as seen in the systematic review in chapter 2 of this dissertation. Chapter 4 revealed that there were indeed concurrent associations between BMI and

victimization as seen in past research, however, these associations disappeared for over time observations. This indicates that an increase in objective weight status would not necessarily predict increased victimization experiences, a finding to be considered while investigating risk-factors to bullying behaviors and designing preventative interventions. In addition, chapters 4 and 5 suggest that the strength and eventually the direction of associations between BMI or SES context and victimization *reversed* over time, indicating a change in the cumulative impact of bullying behaviors with time. This could mean that earlier victimization experiences entice resilience among students, or possibly they get used to it. In any case it looks as if that what happens protects them from being predisposed to future victimization experiences when later on being faced with victimization attempts. The longitudinal design in the present dissertation allowed to capture change, particularly with two important benefits: (a) to examine within-unit change or growth trajectories across time, and (b) inter-unit differences in change that permit prediction (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010).

These observations in the present dissertation could not have been derived through basic cross-sectional designs alone. The fundamental findings that have been implied through cross-sectional studies in past research may not be representative of the full picture, rather may even be misleading in this field of study. It has also been noted that a minimum number of three repeated measures suffices as *best practice* to ensure reliability of a longitudinal design (Singer & Willett, 2003) as undertaken in the present dissertation. We explored nonlinear and/or discontinuous growth models as seen in chapter 5, as well as a reciprocal model for bi-directional influences in chapter 4 to conclude that although bullying behaviors may be present at a single time point, the same students may not be continued to be bullied over time. This is also in line with the network analysis approach (Borsboom & Cramer, 2013) that reports that time-intensive data is methodologically advanced not only in studying causal inferences from one construct to another, but also to predict future development of an outcome

through dynamic networks, beyond elementary intra-individual and between-subject observations. Borsboom and Cramer (2013) establish in their study of mental health that disorders are not outcomes of neatly manifested causal backgrounds, rather a system of causally connected symptoms that need to be represented, analyzed, and studied in their full complexity. We thus encourage future researchers to employ longitudinal designs to yield information about temporal precedence, thereby allowing an examination of which phenomena are causes and which effects, and examine patterns of chains of causes and consequences and the interplay between them.

Limitations and Conclusion

The present study has several limitations. Despite entailing a comprehensive report on traditional bullying in schools, the systematic review does not include a report on cyberbullying, which is an important factor in bullying behaviors in today's world of technology and social media (Hase et al., 2015; Mishna et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2012). Research on cyberbullying may contribute towards significant findings in India where relatively most social mobile accounts belong to young people (UNICEF, 2019b). Furthermore, in this dissertation, we do not differentiate between the forms of bullying and victimization behaviors, i.e., physical, social, or relational bullying (Janssen et al., 2004). Past literature, as seen in chapter 2, indicates that there are differences between forms of bullying with regard to gender and caste (Malhi et al., 2014; Skrzpiec et al., 2015). Future research thus considering these aspects of the Indian context may help further understand the dynamics and correlates of victimization experiences in youth. Another limitation of the present study is in the methodological framework, where considerable number of exclusions were made from the originally collected data. Research in India, as opposed to western countries, has been depicted as ridden with logistical and administrative challenges as commonly observed in past studies (Bapat, 2016; Smith et al., 2018), especially pertaining to longitudinal study designs. The Indian

education system faces several challenges such as over-centralization, bureaucratic structures and lack of accountability, transparency, or professionalism in addition to insufficient resources and facilities (Sheikh, 2017), leading to inadequate focus on research at schools overall. To add to this, school quality with regard to infrastructure is poor. For instance, there is limited and unequal access to drinking water, toilets, furniture, teaching aids, books, fans, etc. in government or lower SES schools (Kingdon, 2007), while classroom sizes (number of students per class) are large. This makes it common for researchers to encounter multiple challenges in collecting “clean” data from schools in India.

Due to the aforementioned data exclusions, it is possible that certain important factors have got overlooked in the present study resulting in the possibility of bias in the findings (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010); for instance, an in-depth comparative analysis of data missing at random (MAR) and systematic or deliberate exclusions, i.e., data missing not at random (MNAR), is missing. The present dissertation tried to compensate for the omissions by maintaining a detailed description and transparency in the reporting of exclusions as well as carefully applying sophisticated statistical techniques (for instance, sensitivity analyses) to strengthen methodological rigor in analyses and findings. Robust techniques like FIML estimations have proven to be effective in handling problematic data that is MNAR (Enders, 2018) and should be employed in future research.

The present study concludes that overall bullying is common in India, as it is globally, and it has many risk-factors as well as consequences among adolescents, some that are typical to the Indian context. There is considerable amount of socio-cultural influence in bullying behaviors in India, like through caste or religion, that go beyond individual adolescent traits such as psychopathy, weight status, or objective SES. Research from western cultures may not be applicable in India. Furthermore, the differences observed in the present dissertation between concurrent and overtime

associations in bullying behaviors cautions future researchers that cross-sectional associations, especially from outside India, may not be representative of the full picture of bullying behaviors. Worldwide, there are several bullying- and aggression-prevention programs being implemented in schools (Leff et al., 2004), however, data on prevalence estimates, bullying correlates, and subsequent interventions designs are woefully scarce in India. One intervention program in India, the SEHER program in Bihar (Shinde et al., 2018), focuses on activities at the school level (awareness generation, wall-magazine, speak-out boxes, school health promotion committee), at the group level (workshops and talks for groups of students), and at the individual level (counseling and referral services for students). They found that the intervention had substantial benefits in school health when delivered by lay counsellors, but no impact on health-related outcomes when the intervention was delivered by teachers. Another intervention design in India, the multicomponent school-based intervention in Chandigarh (Rana et al., 2018), is based on the social ecological model that focuses on individual level (students), relationship level (parents and teachers), and community level (school) factors to reduce school-based bullying. The expectation of the quasi-experimental design used in the study is that the burden of bullying perpetration is decreased. The authors suggest that the study may guide policy makers on formulating guidelines for a broad implementation of the program. The present dissertation aims to provide future researchers with the context of bullying behaviors in India. Despite the abundance of programs globally, clarity regarding the success of anti-bullying programs as well as critical components of effective anti-bullying programs are unclear (Hymel et al., 2015), requiring attention and additional efforts in the future, in India and worldwide. Future programs could include not only individual level attributes, but also consider group dynamics as well as contextual factors like caste, religion, gender, age, or SES in India when to design effective interventions for bullying behaviors.

