

## Guest Editorial

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# Cultural Issues in Bullying and Cyberbullying among Children and Adolescents: Methodological Approaches for Comparative Research

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Bullying, including cyberbullying, is an internationally recognized form of problematic behavior that can have serious and long-lasting consequences for all individuals involved. Correlations between bullying and cyberbullying, and psychiatric, psychosomatic, and physical health issues, suicide ideation, and suicide have emerged in empirical research. Although there are important differences by cultural context, we can assume that forms of bullying are not uncommon in all societies and communities across the globe (Smith, Kwak, & Toda, 2016). Consequently, bullying research and all that it encompasses is a far-reaching area of study with relevance internationally. However, to date research in western countries and specific methodological approaches have dominated the area. For example, prevalence rates across Europe are often established using standard questionnaires that have been translated into appropriate languages. While this serves to give some indication for comparison between cultures, there is

ultimately a range of methodological flaws with this approach that indicates that we should treat findings with caution.

There is a lack of accurate findings and inconsistencies with huge variation regarding prevalence rates and the nature of bullying behavior. For example, Juvonen and Gross (2008) found that 72% of participants had experienced at least one incident of cyberbullying compared to 77% who had experienced at least one incident of face-to-face bullying, whilst Schneider et al. (2012) found that 15.8% had experienced cyberbullying compared to 25.9% who had experienced face-to-face bullying (cf. Hess & Scheithauer, 2015; Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2015). These variations could be due to different reasons including the lack of common definition and terminologies for bullying (Smith, 2014) and cultural influences (ethnicity or nationality), which affect the way children and adolescents perceive the concept of bullying and cyberbullying. In addition, different research methodologies (Sabella, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2013), different approaches in statistical data analysis, or inadequate methodological approaches in comparative cross-cultural research could lead to these discrepancies. For instance, report of bullying experiences may be confounded by the

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use of self-report methods in which cultural issues may influence one's likelihood of self-identifying as a bully or victim, or both.

Cultural differences in attitudes regarding violence as well as perceptions, attitudes, and values regarding face-to-face and cyber bullying are likely to exist and have an impact on study results. For this reason, research on different methodological approaches to investigate the nature of traditional and cyberbullying amongst children and adolescents of different ethnicities and cultures is essential. This special section of the *International Journal of Developmental Science (IJDS)* focusses on studies devoted to innovative methodological, conceptual, or empirical approaches in the comparative investigation of cross-national, ethnic, and/or cultural differences in the prevalence and nature of bullying and/or cyberbullying.

On a positive note, there has recently been an influx in cross-national comparisons using more innovative approaches (Smith et al., 2016). This special section is one such example. The collection of four papers represents innovative and international research in cross-national comparisons of bullying taking into account different methodological approaches for comparative research. These are mainly cross-national studies that compared different aspects between different cultures. The collection is truly international, with data sets from 60 countries (49 countries from four datasets in one article) represented in the four articles, reflecting the widespread interest in cross-national comparison studies and concern on how to compare bullying and cyberbullying internationally.

### **Summary of Studies**

Peter Smith, Susanne Robinson, and Barbara Marchi investigated four sources of large-scale self-report survey data on victim rates, cross-nationally. These are EU Kids Online, Global School Health Survey (GSHS), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC). There are some differences in methodology between these surveys, but all use pupil self-report data. These four survey sources have provided researchers with the opportunity to evaluate large samples of multi-national data on school aged children.

Altogether 49 countries are featured in more than one survey. However, when prevalence rates

by country are compared across surveys, there are some obvious discrepancies, which suggest a need to examine systematically how these surveys compare in measuring cross-national differences. Sample sizes are large, a minimum of 1,000 in each country. The study by Smith et al. examined measures of internal validity (consistency within a survey) by examining consistency of country differences with respect to age, gender, or frequency criterion, and external validity (agreement across surveys) by comparing the victim prevalence rates across the surveys, pairwise for countries in common. The results of the internal validity using correlations across strict or lenient frequency criteria, across types of bullying, across ages, and across genders were high. On the other hand the external validity, in the sense of how much agreement there is between the four surveys, where they overlap in countries the agreement was to be found from moderate to zero. These low external validity rates raise concerns about using these cross-national data sets to make judgments about which countries are higher or lower in victim rates.

The authors discussed a range of methodological issues that could explain the limited external validity including age range, sampling issues, dates of survey, administration procedures, questionnaire issues, definitions of bullying, time reference period, types assessed, frequency scales, and linguistic issues. The authors recommended that we should be cautious about judging how countries appear in terms of high or low prevalence rates for being bullied. Thus more research is needed into why there is a lack of high agreement amongst the surveys, including country comparisons on rates of bullying others, gender differences, and age differences. Revising definitions and more details on how bullying was translated into different languages would also be helpful in examining comparability. This is the first study that has compared these four large datasets and checked their internal and external validity and the results could have implications on how policy makers worldwide use and treat these international figures.

Takuya Yanagida, Petra Gradinger, Dagmar Strohmeier, Olga Solomontos-Kountouri, Simona Trip, and Carmen Bora investigated the prevalence of traditional and cyber bullying, victimization respectively, comparing the use of single-item and multiple-item self assessment measures in 12 year old students from three countries, Austria, Cyprus, and Romania. This is an important study as many large-scale cross-national studies rely on a single-item measurement when comparing prevalence rates

of traditional and cyber bullying and victimization between countries, which have low validity and might be biased. Research already showed that prevalence rates of cyberbullying but not for traditional bullying are underestimated with a single-item approach compared to a multiple-item approach (Grading, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2010).

Traditional and cyber bullying, victimization respectively, were measured with four scales where the word “bullying” was not used but instead very specific behavioral descriptions were used. While the single-item approach directly addresses the involvement in bullying or cyberbullying during a certain period of time (e.g., during the past couple of months), the multiple-item approach addresses the involvement in several concrete behaviors (e.g., hitting, teasing, etc.) considered major forms of the bullying or cyberbullying construct. Results were compared between countries with regards to differences in traditional and cyber bullying and victimisation using innovative statistical approaches. Firstly, latent variable approach based on the measurement model with ordered-categorical indicators under scalar measurement invariance was used to compare latent means of traditional cyber bullying victimization between the three countries. Secondly, a non-parametric approach was chosen.

The substantial results of the single- and multiple-item approach did not differ for traditional bullying and traditional victimization, but they did for cyberbullying and cyber-victimization. Independent of the measurement approach, the prevalence of traditional bullying and victimization in Austria was higher compared with both Cyprus and Romania. Moreover, prevalence rates of traditional bullying were higher in Cyprus compared with Romania, while no differences regarding traditional victimization between Cyprus and Romania were found. Cyberbullying in Austria was higher compared with both Cyprus and Romania which did not differ from each other according to the multiple-item measurement approach. However, when applying a single-item measurement approach the difference between Austria and Romania was not statistically significant anymore. All results changed depending on the measurement approach for cyber-victimization.

Conceptually, the single-item approach assumes that the broad concept of bullying including hostile intent, repetition, power imbalance, and its various forms can be understood easily by all respondents. Research however shows that this might not be the case for children of all age groups (Monks & Smith,

2006; Vaillancourt et al., 2008) and countries (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefvooghe, 2002; Strohmeier, Yanagida, & Toda, 2016). Furthermore, a concept which means exactly the same as the English term “bullying” does not exist in all languages (Strohmeier et al., 2016). Moreover, when using a single-item approach it is not possible to investigate the equivalency of the constructs between countries, which is a crucial precondition for any statistically valid comparison between them.

This study relied on self-assessments only and the data was not representative which limits the national generalizability of the findings. However, the study results have very important implications in that the multiple-item measurements are more trustworthy, as they were established to be cross-nationally valid and that results of single-item measurements, even if they come from large scale comparison studies, should be interpreted with caution.

Ting-Lan Ma and Amy Bellmore investigated early adolescents’ responses (middle school students) upon witnessing peer victimization in Taiwan and the U.S. Participants completed a survey that contained both open-ended questions and a vignette. This study compared peer victimization witness responses and the reasons behind the responses of early adolescents from Taiwan and the U.S. Specifically the study investigated whether adolescents from these two cultures differ on their willingness to help, and the endorsement of specific help and non-help behaviors toward a peer victim by using a vignette methodology describing hypothetical peer victimization incident. The vignettes, which were modified to be implemented in Taiwan, included a short scenario to investigate the likelihood that a student would help upon witnessing peer victimization of the same gender. In addition, communal social goal was measured to examine whether Taiwanese students showed more interdependent cultural orientation than U.S. students. Finally, adolescents were asked to write a few sentences to describe the most recent time that they saw another student getting picked on at school and how they responded when they witnessed this event and why.

The results showed that Taiwanese students reported a higher communal social goal orientation than the U.S. students. Taiwanese adolescents reported higher endorsement of telling the teacher, comforting the victim or leaving the situation, and lower endorsement of telling the bully to stop compared to U.S. students. There were no significant differences across the two culture groups in witness endorsement

of likelihood of helping, ignoring the situation, and watching the situation. However, in Taiwan, when adolescents decided to intervene in a victimization incident, some tried telling the bully to stop in a socially polite way. They were more likely to comfort the victims and advise the bully to stop, and less likely to directly tell the bully to stop. When adolescents indicated a non-help response, Taiwanese students were more likely to ignore the situation and join in/reinforce the bully, while U.S. adolescents were more likely to leave the situation and do nothing.

When discussing the reasons for their responses, Taiwanese adolescents emphasized that it was due to a personal belief that peers should be friendly and helping, while U.S. adolescents expressed a personal belief that a person should be treated fairly. In addition, while comforting the victim Taiwanese expressed understanding for the victim and U.S. adolescents instead focused on assuring the self-confidence of the victim. With regards to those who chose to stay aside and not help the victim, Taiwanese adolescents emphasized doing so to abide with social conformity whereas U.S. adolescents focused on not overstepping boundaries.

This study relied on two approaches to understanding cultural differences between Taiwanese and American students: The dimension of individualism-collectivism and independence-interdependence where the former focuses on worldviews and the later focuses on a personal mindset or self-construal (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Oysterman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). The study used a vignette that was developed in the U.S., which may not have the same meaning in Taiwan. But the study is distinguished in using both quantitative and qualitative results to investigate how adolescents responded to peer victimization in both cultures.

Michelle Wright, Takuya Yanagida, Anna Ševčíková, Ikuko Aoyama, Lenka Dědková, Hana Macháčková, Zheng Li, Shanmukh Kamble, Fatih Bayraktar, Shruti Soudi, Li Lei, and Chang Shu compared coping strategies for public and private face-to-face and cyber hypothetical victimization amongst adolescents aged 11–15 years in six countries: China, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, India, Japan, and the U.S. Public face-to-face victimization was described as experiencing face-to-face bullying when other adolescents are present, while private face-to-face victimization occurs between the bully and the victim, without any other adolescents present. Coping strategies depended on different factors including culture, the type and meaning

of stressful situations and people's belief systems. Adolescents completed questionnaires on the hypothetical coping strategies that they would use for four different victimization vignettes, including public face-to-face victimization, public cyber victimization, private face-to-face victimization, and private cyber victimization. Participants were asked about their endorsement of collectivism and individualism.

Overall, the findings revealed that adolescents relied more on avoidance, social support, retaliation, helplessness, and ignoring for public and face-to-face forms of victimization than for private and cyber forms of victimization. Cultural and country differences are also shown with regards to coping strategies. This is the first study that investigated adolescents' use of coping strategies based on both the medium and publicity. The findings highlight the need for specific, as well as cultural and context driven solutions designed to address bullying and victimization across the world.

## **Conclusions**

The studies presented indicate the importance of the methodological approach that is adapted when comparing bullying and cyberbullying prevalence and associated factors amongst different cultures. We need to consider different tools (single versus multiple method approach), specific coping strategies (for public versus private and face to face versus cyber), cultural differences in interrupting peer victimization situations, and to take into account the internal as well as the external validity of any study to be able to compare between different countries.

Most studies used self-assessments measures; future studies need to utilize more methods (peer nomination, peer reports, teacher and parents reports, observations etc.) and compare between them. Other factors that need to be taken into account are linguistic issues related to the translation and definition of bullying in different cultures, age and gender differences, and most importantly cultural effects on different forms of bullying including physical, verbal, and relational.

Inconsistent results between measurement methods and different methodological approaches raise the question of whether it is wise to look at bullying between countries without taking into account the different 'cultural' characteristics of each country. Countries differ on very many characteristics

like educational policies, personal beliefs, attitudes, values, and so on. The Smith et al. study is the first attempt to compare four big international data sources and indicate that comparisons between countries using different datasets should be dealt with caution due to low external validity. The Yanagida et al. study raised the importance of multiple-item self-assessment measures when comparing prevalence rates of traditional and cyber bullying and victimization between countries to raise the validity of these studies. The main conclusion is that datasets should have common and similar valid methodologies taking into account several factors as stated above to be able to increase the validity of the datasets and cross-cultural comparisons. Traditional and cyber bullying will continue to be a problem for children, their parents, and schools. Educators, policy makers, and researchers should be sensitive to the potential cultural values that may be associated with bullying behavior when they adapt a given intervention and prevention program from another cultural context. Furthermore, schools need to take this into account when designing their anti-bullying policies or when tackling bullying (Samara & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2012; Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008). Taking the Ma et al. study into account it may be particularly important to teach peer witnesses for example to maintain a sense of interpersonal connection and group belongingness such as peer support systems in interdependent cultures (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006).

According to the Wright et al. study, understanding adolescents' coping strategies is important because such strategies relate to their short-term and long-term adjustment and their later involvement in face-to-face and cyber victimization. Future research should focus on the short-term and long-term effects of coping strategies according to their recommendations. It is important that schools intervene to prevent bullying inside and outside the school with attention to the form of bullying and whether it is done in public or privately as coping strategies may relate to a specific form or medium. The reliance on inappropriate coping strategies could be a waste for the resources and make students more vulnerable to victimization.

In sum, the findings from these studies have implications for the development of culturally-sensitive measurement approaches as well as intervention and prevention programs aimed at reducing adolescents' involvement in bullying in multiple contexts across various countries (cf. Scheithauer & Tsorbatzoudis, 2016).

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### Bio Sketches

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