

## A SOCIETAL VIOLENCE SCENE: BULLYING IN SCHOOL

### Review Article

## BİR TOPLUMSAL ŞİDDET SAHNESİ: OKULDA ZORBALIK

Oğuzhan Zahmacioğlu

*Yeditepe University Hospital, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Istanbul, Turkey*

Naz Berfu Akbaş

*Yeditepe University Hospital, Psychiatry, Istanbul, Turkey*

Hakan Atalay

*Yeditepe University Hospital, Psychiatry, Istanbul, Turkey*

### Corresponding Author

**Oğuzhan Zahmacioğlu**

*Yeditepe University Hospital, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Istanbul, Turkey*  
Tel: +90532 302 09 69  
Tel: +90216 578 40 00  
Email: ozahmacioglu@yeditepe.edu.tr

### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Bullying is a complex behavioral disorder that can be observed in all societies and socio-economic classess. Although a common problem, this issue has been somehow neglected in child psychiatric literature. In this paper the aim is to draw attention to the reasons of bullying behavior and make suggestions about the measures to be taken against bullying, keeping in mind that it is an important risk factor for child mental health.

**Method:** To cast light on this important issue we reviewed the studies of the last

twenty years .

**Results and conclusion:**The most important implications of these researches are as follows: Each case contains its own dynamics. So not cross-sectional but longitudinal research should be the way to understand internal and external factors creating bullying. The notions like "excluded children become bullies or all bullies are excluded children" are not always true. Despite the richness of the literature on this subject, most data comes from observations and questionnaires but not on ampirical studies. This maybe due to the complex and unique structure of bullying behavior that may be hard to measure.

**Key Words:** Bullying, bullies, violence in schools.

### ÖZET

**Giriş:** Zorbalık tüm toplumlarda ve sosyo ekonomik katmanlarda gözlenebilen bir davranım bozukluğu türüdür. Tüm dünyada oldukça yaygın olmasına rağmen psikiyatri yazınında hak ettiği ölçüde yer almamıştır. Bu yazıda çocukların sağlıklı ruhsal gelişimini bozucu önemli etkileri olan zorbalık konusunun nedenlerine dikkat çekilmesi amaçlanmış, engellemeye yönelik tedbirler üzerinde durulmuştur.

**Metod:** Konuyla ilgili özellikle son yirmi yılın güncel araştırma ve derlemeleri taranmıştır.

**Bulgular ve Sonuç:** Bu araştırmaların en önemli çıkarımları şunlardır: Her olgu kendine özgü dinamikler barındırır, kesitsel değil derinlemesine incelenmelidir. Zorbalığın beslendiği iç ve dış faktörler dikkate alınmalıdır. "Dışlanmış çocuklar zorba olurlar veya zorbalılar dışlanmış çocuklardır" ön kabulü her zaman doğru değildir. Bazı araştırmacıların belirttiği gibi sonuçların çoğu ampirik ölçümlere değil anketlere ve gözlemlere dayalıdır. Bu durum, zorbalığın bir davranım türü olarak karmaşık, özgün yapısının, standart ölçek oluşturmayı zor kılmasından kaynaklanıyor olabilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Zorbalık, zorbalılar,

okullarda şiddet

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying at school is considered a serious problem in all cultures. Among children and adolescents, being bullied can lead to a variety of psychosocial and academic adjustment problems (1,2). Previous studies have reported that victims of bullying display a higher incidence and severity of school adaptation problems such as school refusal, especially between the ages of 5 and 7. For this reason, studies often emphasized the need for clinicians to take bullying into account when evaluating the etiology of school adaptation problems (3). In the long-term, bullying can lead to an increase in the frequency of psychiatric disorders such as anxiety disorders, depression, anorexia and bulimia nervosa, and also in the occurrence of somatic symptoms such as loss of appetite, headache, sleep disorders, stomach ache, and fatigue (4,5). Studies have shown that suicide ideation and attempts have a significantly higher incidence among bullied children in comparison to control groups. Similarly, previous studies have reported that the victims of bullying can exhibit long-lasting and severe mental disorders such violent behavior, self-mutilation, and psychotic symptoms. These same studies have also emphasized that due to the type of behavior they display in class, it is relatively easier for children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders to become subject to bullying (6,7). In other words, not only does bullying lead to psychiatric disorders among its victims, but psychiatric disorders themselves can cause children to become victims of bullying.

Bullying behavior is often accompanied by emotional adaptation problems and tobacco/alcohol use (8). Bullies are considered to be potential candidates for gang membership in their adulthood. According to several authors, bullying can be considered as a precursor type of behavior for future gang involvement (9). In their study evaluating a similar aspect of

bullying behavior, Andershed et al. determined that bullies at school are the same individuals who later carry weapons and display violent behavior on the streets(10).

Most cases of bullying consist of relatively "light" verbal attacks (11). As the harm inflicted is generally of a psychological nature, it is not difficult for the bully to present excuses or to defend him/herself by saying that he/she "was only joking" (12).

Cases of bullying are becoming gradually and consistently more common in clinical practice. The aim of this review was to evaluate bullying more comprehensively; to demonstrate what is done around the world about bullying; and to present practical solutions to this phenomenon.

## METHODS

In this review, we first scanned the key words "school bullying" on the Medline, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar search engines. In accordance with the aims of the literature review, our evaluations included research articles performed since the 1990s that considered bullying comprehensively from a psychological and social context, and whose procedural designs satisfied the relevant scientific criteria. The authors of the current study thus focused on studies that evaluated the personality structure and identity of bullies, and the nature of the bully-victim relationship. Articles that were considered to reflect the specific and unique conditions of the country in which they were published were excluded from the review, on the grounds that the results of such articles would not be generalizable.

## RESULTS

### Epidemiology

Bullying behavior is most commonly observed during school, and while children are going to or returning from school (13). In a previous comprehensive field study conducted in a school environment, 37.4%

of the participating students described experiencing at least one case of bullying within the past one month (14). A large-scale study in the United States reported that 4% of adolescents between the ages of 12-18 were afraid of being subject to an attack in the following six months, while 5% avoided certain areas of their school, and 13% described that they had been subject to verbal abuse (15). Haynie et al. reported that between 4-6% of children were victims of bullying (16). In another study conducted on 15,686 students between 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, 17% of the students described that they were subject to bullying (generally at school), while 19% described that they occasionally bullied others, and 6% described that they had both committed and been subject to bullying (17). Bullying represents a mental health threat not only for its victims, but also for children/adolescents who commit or witness bullying in their environment (18).

Bullying behavior is observed more commonly among boys than girls (19). Direct behaviors and attacks such as striking and verbal attacks are more common among male bullies, while female bullies tend to exhibit more relational and indirect behaviors/attacks (20). In other words, boys prefer direct methods (striking, insulting, etc...), while girls prefer indirect methods such as spreading gossip, isolating the victim, etc... (21).

A school survey performed on 230 students diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (a condition that is very conducive for stigmatization during childhood) determined that 40% of the students were subject to bullying (22).

### **The personality structure and social identity of bullies**

At the time when bullying was first being conceptualized as a proactive form of aggression, it was determined that bullies are not necessarily social inept individuals with emotional disorders. On the contrary, many act in a strategic way to reach their goals, which requires a certain level of

cognitive skills (23).

The high social status of certain bullies contrasts with the assertion of certain previous studies that claimed that bullies are generally socially rejected individuals. Moreover, social rejection or being an outcast at school are not an obstacle for popularity or being "cool." On the contrary, these negative characteristics may grant a distinguishing quality to the individual, thus further increasing their popularity (24).

Even in normative adolescent groups, the reasons why bullies are generally perceived as being "cool" and popular has not been elucidated. According to one explanation, antisocial and harsh behaviors and attitudes are perceived among adolescents as a way of challenging the rules and values of adults (25). According to the resource control theory, individuals who have the most power, material access, and social resources (e.g. the most desired toy, the best role in a play, the most sexual appeal) are held in high regard by their peers (26,27).

The main expectation of bullies is to be respected and admired (28). Bullies specifically select their target, as well as their place and timing, such that they can achieve these expectations to the fullest. While bullies chose a place and time for their bullying behavior, they also and most importantly choose a victim. It has been observed that when selecting victims, bullies especially choose individuals with low self-confidence who will easily submit to them; bullies also appear to plan the type and dosage of aggression they commit beforehand (30). Thus, by repeatedly bullying the individuals they have selected as targets without any opposition from their environment, bullies wish to preserve and maintain their current "high status."

One of the main components of the system of bullying is the witness. Instead of exhibiting their bullying behavior in isolated and calm places, bullies generally prefer to display aggression towards the victim while with their group of friends. A

study based solely on the observation of a schoolyard through natural methods reported that, in 85% of the cases, bullying was committed while the bully's friends were around (31,32).

Certain studies have reported that one-third of adolescents considered status as being more important than friendship, while 80% considered it more important than social rules (33).

An increase in bullying behavior during adolescence has been demonstrated by numerous studies (34). Especially when children first begin to attend an upper school (i.e. when first attending middle school or high school), their desire to appear strong in the new social environment, to find acceptance in a group of friends, and to become popular sets the ground for future bullying behavior (35).

It is not possible to say that bullies are mistaken into thinking that their behavior will grant them a higher status. Studies generally show that bullies are generally perceived within their group of friends as being popular, strong, and cool individuals (36).

### Being a victim

Why do many children not support the victim of bullying, rather than unwillingly taking the side of the bully and thus rewarding him/her? This is possibly related to the position of the bully and the victim within the dynamics of the group. As bullying is often committed in front of many witnesses, it is possible that children are afraid of being rejected by the larger group in case they side with the victim (37).

The behavior and attitudes of the children towards the victims of bullying are shaped by the attitudes they observe in other children. In studies based on fictional stories, it was observed that the subjects tended to sympathize more with the victim in case there were children opposing the bully (compared to situations where children sided with bully) (38). As bullies

are generally perceived as popular and strong, changing this type of behavior among the witnesses of bullying appears to be difficult. To guarantee their physical and mental safety, other children instinctively side with the stronger bully rather than the "loser" child (29).

Acting aggressively towards a victim, or at least not showing any friendly behavior towards the victim might be perceived by a witness as "appropriate" for the given place and time, and might grant him/her access to the group of friends he/she longs for. Such attitudes indicate that certain children are capable of strategic thinking with regards to group adaptation (23).

According to Schuster, children harbor negative feelings towards children who are victims of bullying in their classes. Most of their study subjects expressed that the victims of bullying are mainly responsible for the negative events that befall them. Interestingly, continued bullying causes the negative feelings towards the victims to gradually become even stronger (39). As described by Olweus in his notion of "the cognitive changes that take place over time in the perception of the victim," the victim who is targeted due to his/her relative isolation becomes even more isolated over time as a result of the bullying (40).

Bullies generally have one or two victims as main targets. By keeping the number of victims low, not only do bullies achieve the gratification/satisfaction they desire, but also minimize their risk (23). If the number of victims is increased, it would then become possible for the victims to show solidarity between themselves. In such circumstances, it is likely that the other children in the class would end their silence about the bullying, and the bully would eventually be held responsible for his/her behavior and the conflicts he/she has caused. On the other hand, when only one victim is selected, it is easier for the bully to rationalize and find excuses for his/her behavior. For instance, he/she might simply blame the victim. For this reason, victims are generally selected among isolated/rejected children with few or no

friends (40). If the victim is an isolated child, he/she will generally hold him/herself accountable for the bullying behavior. The child will assume that it is he/she who is lonely and maladjusted. As evidence for this train of thought, he/she might think: "they are only picking on me, which means that I have a problem." On the other hand, if several other children were bullied as well, the victim of bullying might start to think: "the bullies are the source of the problem, not me."

Certain researchers suggest that we should avoid using clear-cut categorizations such as the "bully" and the "victim." These researchers describe that a victim can also become a bully in other circumstances, that the "dividing line" between these two groups is very permeable, and that these types of categorizations are not clinically useful.

### Friend groups as a factor

Classes at school differ from other social groups in one important respect: membership is not voluntary. In other words, the victim cannot easily escape his/her predicament and class in case he/she wishes to do. Although children cannot choose their classmates, it is generally observed that when selecting friends, children generally approach individuals from their classes whom they consider to be similar (42).

Bullying attitudes and behaviors possess characteristic features that are shared by the members of a group (34). This results from the fact that children with similar attitudes tend gather and group together. The same dynamics are also applicable for those defending the victims, and those who choose to remain silent when a person is being bullied. In other words, it is observed that children who stand idle and thus implicitly approve the bullying behavior also represent a social group in themselves (43).

For bullying behavior and attitudes to become widespread, it is not necessary for children to be members of a group or to be

in close contact with other bullies. A study conducted on children who recently started middle school (6<sup>th</sup> grade) demonstrated that children who perceived bullies as having a higher status in their school environment soon started to engage in bullying as well. Children who consider bullies as role models, and who emulate their actions in order to reach their level of popularity, will begin to adopt and embrace bullying behavior themselves (43).

In such groups of friends, individuals resemble each other not only with respect to the method and dose of aggression they display, but also with respect to the characteristics of their targets (44). This unity in action and target is a form of requisite for the formation of a group identity. Actions and activities that are performed together tend to reinforce intra-group bonds, and are thus important for the continued existence of the group. In other words, bullying is not only a source of strength and status/prestige, but is also a means for reinforcing the sense of belonging of individuals (45).

Friend groups have both positive and negative roles in the development and continuation of bullying.<sup>42</sup> Depending on the nature of their involvement in a bullying event, children can be categorized into four groups. These groups are: (1) those who physically contribute to the bullying; (2) those who verbally contribute to the bullying; (3) those who remain passive by turning a blind eye to the bullying; and (4) those who support the victim and stand against the bully (46).

It is claimed that the group dynamics of bullying are different than the dynamics observed in gangs – where every member is an active participant to the actions committed by the gang. It is described that within the context of bullying events, the characteristic traits of every individual interacts with the specific conditions of their environment (e.g. the class environment), causing each individual to display a specific and unique type of behavior.

The fact that bullying events generally

involve witnesses from the environment, as well as the friends of the bully who might participate in the event to varying extents, is a topic that has been exhaustively evaluated by researchers (46). How does the presence of such participants affect the general characteristics of a bullying event? Salmivalli et al. defined four different types of participant profiles: (1) assistants who actively stand by the bully; (2) those who contribute to the continuation of the bullying by providing positive feedback to the bully (e.g. by laughing at the victim); (3) passive watchers; and (4) those who defend the victim (13).

Gathering an "audience" for their bullying behavior, and receiving approval from this audience explicitly or implicitly (e.g. through their silence, or through their deliberate witnessing of the event), might represent a form of reward for the bully. According to Hawkins et al.'s observations, the presence of friends who take the side of the victim generally leads to the end of the bullying event (32). In contrast, a higher number of individuals who support the in-class bullying will lead to an increase in the frequency and severity of the bullying (47).

Unfortunately, the majority of those witnessing a case of bullying are not aware that they possess the ability to put an end to the event. In fact, studies performed with fictional scenarios have shown that the majority of the children tend to take sides against the bully and to actively help the victim (48). In real cases, however, it is a rare occurrence for individuals to actually side with the victim.

It is known that children who defend the victims are, in general, cognitively competent and emotionally stable individuals. These children tend to form groups between themselves, and serve as positive role models for other children (43). Younger children and girls tend to be more willing and inclined to support the victims of bullying (48). More importantly, these children who defend the victims of bullying are popular individuals who are admired by their friends and peers (36). Unfortunately,

the atmosphere of power and dominance created by the bully is often stronger and more popular. Thus, it is necessary to consider and further evaluate the positive influence of groups that defend the victims of bullying.

Children who actively or passively support bullying, on the other hand, are generally children who are incapable of relating empathically with the victim (49).

### Class-related factors

In social psychology literature, the set of rules, values, and standards shared by the members of a social group is called the "norm." By taking these norms in account, it becomes easier to understand why bullying is observed more frequently in certain types of classes than others. However, it is currently not clear which types of evaluations will help identify the norms associated with bullying, nor is it certain whether such evaluations will be reliable (59).

A previous study described that, in classes where bullying was very common (and in which bullying was consequently considered as a "class norm"), bullying behaviors were related more to the "choice" of its perpetrators than to the rejection or maladjustment of the victim (51). According to a similar study, it was observed that it is easier for bullying from popular children to be considered as socially acceptable by their class. In other words, the class norms were determined by the popular students themselves (52).

In addition to the norms related to bullying, children with high status in their classes also use bullying as a tool to fashion other types of norms. They thus impose a form of "homogeneity" within their classes. For example, bullying against children who do not wear high-quality brands causes such brands and high-quality attire to become the norm of the class. In such cases, it is not necessary for every individual of the class to be subject to bullying, to avoid becoming the next

victim, or to avoid rejection, the individuals within the class will implement the norm by themselves (53). However, class norms may not always have a determining role over individual attitudes. Recently, researchers have begun to discuss the concept of "pluralistic ignorance." According to this concept, although the members of a group may personally consider the group norm (e.g. bullying) to be wrong, they will still believe that the other group members consider it as acceptable (42). Thus, in case a limited number of children make their opinion against bullying known within their group, this might encourage the other group members to do the same. In this way, it will be possible to undermine a harmful class norm from its very foundations.

### The teacher as a factor

Teachers play a very important role with regards to the mental health of children. A healthy relation between the student and the teacher plays a central role in the development of psychosocial adaptation skills in children, such as their self-perception, academic motivation, school performance, acceptance by friend groups, and their sense of belonging (54). Positive support from teachers significantly reduces the incidence of violent and criminal behavior among students (55). A study conducted in Norway with 558 children between the ages of 13-15 demonstrated that increasing support from teachers was associated with a decreased risk of bullying (56). Silver et al., on the other hand, especially emphasized the importance of close teacher-student relations during changes of school and classes (57).

According to our observations, the inability to "express their grievances" further deepens the helplessness experienced by bullying victims. The fact that the act of "snitching/ratting out someone" is considered almost as a taboo in our daily lives denies the bullying victims an important and useful outlet for expressing their problems. This traditional "closed-box" attitude displayed by bullying victims can be bypassed only by increasing

the awareness of teachers and school administrators. In other words, beyond the spoken language of the victim, adults should be able to perceive body language cues among children such as restlessness, avoidance, and timidity. In this respect, both teachers and parents need to be trained by specialists regarding the non-spoken language cues exhibited by bullying victims.

### The school as a factor

Although there are numerous studies regarding the individual factors involved in bullying, there is only limited information on why bullying is encountered more frequently or less frequently in certain schools. Studies that have been conducted to date have yielded different results. According to the results of Ferris and West's study, due to their administrative issues, the inability to enforce discipline rules effectively, and the inadequacy of their educational resources, larger and more crowded schools have difficulties meeting educational and disciplinary expectations, and thus create a fertile ground for the development of criminal behaviors among children (58). Chen reached a similar conclusion, describing that larger and more crowded schools were associated with a higher incidence of criminal behaviors. On the other hand, a study conducted in Ireland reported that bullying was observed more frequently in smaller schools (60). Meanwhile, a third group of studies described no significant positive or negative relation between school size and crowdedness and the incidence of bullying and other criminal behavior (61).

### Important factors in preventing bullying

Considering and analyzing bullying as a group behavior will facilitate the acquisition of a deeper understanding of its root causes.

Bullies that have previously been victims of bullying (or "victim-bullies") should be distinguished from bullies that have never been victims themselves. In these two

cases, the causes of aggression are different. Victim-bullies were determined as children who, although being skilled in certain respects, lacked strategic thinking, consequently demonstrating unplanned, snappy, proactive, and reactive forms of aggression. Many researchers describe that bullying is an "intra-group" phenomenon. Therefore, any efforts for the prevention of bullying should focus not only on the "bully" and/or the "victim," but also on the groups they belong to (62).

In case the bullying is perpetrated only by a "minority," and in case the class in general no longer rewards the bully with popularity and high in-class status, the bully would then lose his/her most important tool for emotional gratification/satisfaction. For this reason, it is important to first work with those who remain silent and on the sidelines during cases of bullying. Working with these groups is relatively easier than working with bullies. It is known that those who remain silent generally consider bullying as a negative form of behavior. However, the main problem is that they do not act on this view, and thus fail to take any initiative. It should hence be appropriately explained and shown to this group of children that other children in their environment are also opposed to bullying. This will allow these children to overcome their "pluralistic ignorance" (29).

Although favorably changing the behavior of those who generally remain silent may not affect the behavior and attitudes of the bullies themselves, it will certainly decrease the grievances and difficulties experienced by the victims. For this reason, within the context of activities attempting to prevent bullying, it is critical to ensure that certain friend groups side with the victim. This is due to the fact that what a bullying victim needs the most is a supportive group (63). The presence of a protective group in the social environment of the victims will serve as a buffer against the trauma they experience (64).

It is also important to ensure that children involved at any stage of the

bullying process face and address the social role they assume. The emphatic awareness of these children should also be increased. However, as defending a bullying victim requires both confidence and courage, children must be taught safe ways to do so, and be encouraged to form groups (42).

Whenever adults are faced with a case of bullying, each case should be considered within the scope of its own dynamics, and cognitive presuppositions should not be allowed to influence such evaluations. Discussions should be performed not in front of the class, but in private meetings; it should also be strongly emphasized that bullying behaviors will not be allowed (42).

Previous studies have shown that rather than just being a case of verbal or physical abuse between two individuals, bullying is actually an intra-group phenomenon involving individuals with multiple social roles. The transformation of children into victims and their isolation from daily school life further aggravates, with each passing day, the harm and detrimental effects they experience. Through the actions and behaviors they unwittingly display during a case of bullying (e.g. by smiling and laughing), children who are witnesses not only reward the bully for his/her behavior, but also discourage and dishearten the victim of the bullying (43).

Although numerous studies have been conducted regarding the attitude, goals, and social positions of bullies, the group-related processes that lead to bullying have still not been sufficiently investigated. Numerous views have been proposed regarding this subject, but few have been supported by empirical tests. Most importantly, it has been observed that children who are part of bullying groups gradually tend to display, over time, increasingly more severe forms of bullying behavior. The reason for this increase is associated with the children's desire to obtain active support from the other members of their group, and to be also appreciated by them (34).



In case bullies are popular and favored individuals in their classes, their influence on the other children will also be greater. This will make it more difficult to assist the victim (29). According to Fitzgerald, bullying can potentially affect not only a single class of environment, but the entire atmosphere of a school (66). This, in turn, will lead to an environment of insecurity and fear within the school. The victims of bullying rarely attempt to protect themselves against their bullies, and most do not even inform their parents about their predicament.

According to the most significant study that has been conducted to date on bullying in Turkey, bullying was, until recent years, generally evaluated within the scope of "school violence." The increase in cases of bullying in recent years, however, has led academicians and official authorities to address this subject and problem more seriously (68).

## CONCLUSION

The increasing prevalence of social violence, and the fact that such violence is being increasingly perceived as legitimate, are the most significant problems of our times. Bullying, which represents a form of violence, affects children at school in one of the most critical stages of their healthy mental development. As long as such violent behavior continues in schools, the risk of encountering the consequences and products of this form of violence in other areas of daily life will increase as well. The results of this review demonstrate that bullying possesses similar dynamics and consequences across many all cultures. It can be seen that the development of bullying behavior, and the effects of bullying on the mental health and development of children, depends on numerous different factors. Character, family, friends, school, society and cultural structure are among the most important of these factors. The presence of adults who are sensitive and responsive to children's and adolescents' problems, and ensuring healthy cognitive and social development and support in schools will render it more

difficulty for bullying behaviors to find suitable ground.

As bullying is a risk factor encountered in a large number of cases admitted to clinics, it is necessary to increase the awareness of all relevant psychiatric care personnel, parents and teachers regarding the general aspects of bullying. Both the treatment of potential psychopathologies in children who commit bullying and the rehabilitation of children who were subject to bullying are subjects directly related to public mental health. For this reason, the treatment of both bullies and bullying victims is of great importance from a public mental health perspective.

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