School Bullying in the Arab World: A Review

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School bullying in the Arab world: A Review
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مراجعة العنف المدرسي في العالم العربي
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Abstract

Objective: School bullying is recognized as a global problem with serious academic, physical, social, and psychiatric consequences. The objective of the present review is to inform lay and formal psychological theories proposed for the understanding of the cultural, social, personality and school-related contextual factors implicated in school bullying in the Arab world and in order to invoke the need for the advancement of national policies, research agendas, and school focused anti-bullying programs. Method: A literature search was conducted for the purposes of reviewing the literature available on school bullying. Results: While peer victimization has been a preoccupation of Europeans and North Americans for many decades, interest in school bullying in the Arab world is a recent phenomenon. The limited prevalence studies on school bullying in the Arab world suggest varying rates with 20.9% of middle-school adolescents reporting bullying in the United Arab Emirates, 31.9% in Morocco, 33.6% in Lebanon, 39.1% in Oman, and 44.2% in Jordan; boys typically endorsing more engagement in peer victimization than girls. Conclusion: There is a need for more research in the Arab world concerning forms, signs, locations and consequences of school bullying in addition to national policies and school-based, anti-bullying program initiatives.

Key words: School bullying, bullying forms, bullying consequences, bullying theories, prevention.
Conflict of interest: None declared

School bullying in the Arab world: a review
School bullying is a global problem confronting the international community. It can involve solo or group-based abuse or aggression directed toward a single individual or a group of individuals with or without the presence of witnesses or bystanders. The four main aspects of school bullying are the bully (perpetrator of bullying behavior); the victim (recipient of bullying behavior); the bully/victim (victim and perpetrator); and the bystander (witness of bullying behavior). School bullying may involve peer victimization in which an individual student or a group of students bullies an individual peer or a peer group; teacher-on-student bullying in which a teacher bullies a student; and student-on-teacher bullying in which a student bullies a teacher.

While decades of empirical research on the understanding, assessment and prevention of school bullying exists in Western countries, interest in school bullying in the Arab world is a recent phenomenon. A possible suggested factor in the relative delay of interest in school bullying relates to the absence of a specific Arabic term for bullying or difficulty in establishing a satisfactory Arabic equivalent to the English term "bully" because of dissatisfaction with such prevailing electronic Arabic-English dictionary translations as baltagi-hired thugs and al irhabi-terrorist. The recent emergence of more acceptable alternative Arabic equivalents to the term bullying, such as aggressive behavior or school violence has been instrumental in spurring interest in school bullying.

In the present literature review (based primarily on Medline and PsychInfo sources), prevailing theories of school bullying and its various forms, signs and consequence as they relate to the Arab world are discussed as are gaps in national policies, research agendas, and school focused anti-bullying program development, implementation and evaluation initiatives.

Definition of school bullying
As a specific form of abuse or aggressive behavior, school bullying is typically defined as an intentional and repeated harmful act directed at a less powerful other in the school setting. While different defining elements such as absence of provocation have been considered, three key elements distinguish school bullying from school violence and simple peer-related interpersonal conflict: intention to cause harm, repetition of the harmful act(s), and an imbalance of power between the bully (perpetrator of bullying) and the bullied (recipient of bullying). The power differential imperative in the definition of school bullying implies that the perpetrator of bullying has an element of an advantage over the victim of bullying such as physical size and strength,
While various classifications of bullying behaviors are proposed, direct and indirect forms of bullying are recognized. Physical, verbal, and cyberbullying are considered direct forms of bullying whereas relational bullying is considered as an indirect form. Physical bullying comprises hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, tripping, spitting, unwelcome touching, having money or other things taken or damaged or breaking belongings, and forcing the other to do things (for the bully). Verbal bullying entails name-calling, taunting, making derogatory comments, and threatening. Cyber-bullying consists of bullying through e-mail, instant messaging, web site posts, and digital messages or images sent to a cellular phone or personal digital assistant. Relational or social bullying, on the other hand, entails isolation or intentional exclusion from a group, spreading lies and hurtful rumors, and making offensive sexual or racial or religious jokes, comments, or gestures.

Prevalence studies on forms, locations and correlates of school bullying in the West have been reported. School bullying occurs in a variety of settings in the school or outside the school boundaries, typical sites being the classroom, playground, hallway, gym, canteen, and toilets. Similarly, prevalence rates for forms of bullying in the USA are 21.0% for being made fun of, called names or insulted; 18.1% for being subjected to rumors; 11.0% for being pushed, shoved, tripped or spit on; 5.8% for being threatened with harm; 5.2% for being excluded from activities on purpose; 4.2% for property being destroyed on purpose; and 4.1% for being forced to do things. Finally, correlates of school bullying in different Western countries include age and sex. In general, adolescent males report higher rates of direct physical, direct verbal and indirect types of bullying than their female counterparts across all age groups. Also, there seemingly is an interaction between age, sex and country as these relate to rates of bullying. For example, bullying prevalence rates for boys in Canada increase with age, but such a trend is not seen in other countries such as the United States. Similarly, verbal bullying seems to decrease with age in Israel, but not in other countries.

There is a paucity of systematic prevalence studies on school bullying locations, forms and correlates in the Arab world. A Microsoft commissioned survey examined cyber-bullying in 25 participant countries, including four Arab countries. In comparison to reported average cyber-bullying prevalence rate of 37% for responders from the 25 participant countries, the prevalence rate for the Egyptian responders was 27%.
that of Moroccan responders 40%, that of Qatari responders 28%, and that of responders from the United Arab Emirates 7%. Fleming and Jacobson examined the correlates of sex and age (12-16 years), and reported higher prevalence rates of bullying for males than females for Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates but not Oman. Fleming and Jacobson also showed a significant downward trend in prevalence rates of bullying for Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, but not for Morocco, Lebanon or Oman.

**Signs of school bullying**

While bullying may not be reported for fear of retaliation and/or feelings of shame, school bullying may be suspected by consideration of academic, physical, emotional and behavioral signs and drop in grades. Common physical signs associated with school bullying include cuts, bruises, scratches, headaches, stomachaches, damaged possessions, and “missing” possessions that need to be replaced. Common emotional signs are social withdrawal and/or shyness, and emotional responses such as anxiety, depression, and anger. Similarly, behavioral signs include changes in eating habits and sleep disturbances, including nightmares, reluctance to participate in activities once enjoyed, beginning to bully siblings or mistreating family pets, sudden change in friends, and suicidal behavior in the form of attempts or threats.

**Consequences of school bullying**

There is considerable research on the developmental consequences of school bullying on the bully, the bullied, the bully-bullied, and the bystander. In addition to academic poor outcome, a most serious consequence of bullying to the bully is the developmental trajectory of power and aggression. It would seem that bullying invokes in the bullies a pattern of antisocial behavior such as possession of weapons, frequent fights, alcohol and drug use, and affiliation with gang groups. The antisocial consequences of school bullying tend to be carried into adulthood in the form of pathological interpersonal disturbances such as adult attachment disturbances, heterosexual violence (dating related aggression and sexual harassment) and domestic battering (spousal abuse, child abuse and elder abuse). Studies that have examined the effects of bullying on well-being also show significant academic, physical health and psychiatric consequences to the bullied. Deterioration in academic performance (poor grades) because of the perception of the school as an unsafe place and its avoidance, and the developmental trajectory of depression and low self-esteem that are carried to adulthood are serious consequences to victims of school bullying. Fleming and Jacobsen showed those bullied, in comparison to a non-bullied control group, reporting significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation, insomnia and feelings of sadness, hopelessness and loneliness. Similarly, Ng and Tsang showed girl victims of bullying having comparable social impairment to boys, but reporting suffering more depression and suicide than boys. Finally, Rivers and others studied bystanders of school bullying and reported that being a witness of bullying was a significant predictor of mental health problems such as somatic complaints, depression, anxiety, and substance use.

In addition to mental health consequences, bullying has adverse effects on physical health. Children who are bullied show higher rates of visits to health professionals and report more instances of physical health complaints, such as headache and abdominal pain than their non-bullied peers. It is suggested that the link between bullying and the negative health consequences may be mediated by the lower hormonal activation of cortisol in bullied children compared to their non-bullied peers. Nevertheless, the link between bullying and risk of mental and physical ill-health is correlational. While bullying may lead to negative mental and physical health consequences, it is equally plausible that children with mental and physical health complaints may be more vulnerable to bullying. At present, both possibilities are empirically supported.

Empirical research on the consequences of bullying in the Arab world is scarce. The World Health Organization Global School-based Student Health Survey on middle-school-aged children (usually between 13 and 15 years of age) from several Arab countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates) showed bullied students reporting significantly higher rates of sadness and hopelessness, loneliness, insomnia and suicide than a non-bullied control group of students.

**Theories of school bullying**

Four theoretical explanations for school bullying are discerned in the Western culture: personality perspective, socio-cultural perspective, school perspective, and group and peer-pressure perspective.

**Personality perspective**

The personality perspective is focused on elucidating the minds of the perpetrator and victim of bullying, and
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identifying environmental factors that shape their minds. More specifically, the personality perspective describes the mind of the bully in the West as externalized and that of the bullied as internalized. The externalized bully mind is predisposed to high self-esteem, aggression, power and control, defiance to social rules and authority, and little empathy for the other. In contrast, the internalized mind of the bullied is preoccupied with low self-esteem, insecurity, social isolation, anxiety, introversion, inferiority, and passivity (lack of predisposition to self-defense or retaliation).

The personality perspective to school bullying implicates the home environment in the shaping of the minds of the bully and the bullied. Whereas the familial environment of the bully tends to be punitive and authoritarian, the dysfunctional home climate of the bullied tends to be overprotective or enmeshed. The authoritarian style of parenting and parental use of punishment and over-control contributes to the dynamics of the bully ‘not feeling loved’ and the tendency to displace hostility and aggression to the school context. Similarly, the overprotective and emotionally over-involved family climate of the bullied contributes to their feelings of inferiority and social incompetence.

Systematic studies on the minds of the Arab school bully and bullied are lacking. Nevertheless, lay theories in the Arab world concerning school bullying focus on family problems (mshklat ousarieh) such as family neglect, divorce, domestic abuse (spouse and child), and harsh discipline as causal factors in peer victimization.

Socio-cultural perspective

In contrast to the personality perspective’s focus on extraordinary children with extraordinary problematic backgrounds, the socio-cultural perspective views the cause of bullying as societal and cultural. More specifically, the socio-cultural perspective posits that school bullying is a product of societal commitment to a culture of war rather than a culture of peace. For example, school-aged children growing up in socio-cultural climates that are replete with political turmoil and violence, and diversity-based discriminatory influences and in which conflict is resolved by violence and discrimination of minority groups are presumed to emulate aggressive and violent behavior as part of their daily routine.

Consistent with the socio-cultural perspective, mass media portrayal and glorification of violence is implicated in violence among Arab youth in the Arab world. More specifically, it is observed that Western and Turkish movies and dramatic shows “feed a violent spirit among Arab children and youth, gives them the illusion that violence is a powerful weapon for use, and that violence is the ideal approach to resolving problems”.

Also consistent with the socio-cultural perspective, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that diversity-based bullying does occur in schools in the Arab world. Informal surveys of teachers in Lebanese schools, for example, suggest that peer-on-peer bullying occurs on the basis of religious sects (e.g., Shiite vs. Sunni), physical appearance (particularly crooked teeth and being overweight), and perceived sexual orientation.

School perspective

The school perspective implicates the school climate, both physical and social, as the culprit in school violence and bullying. Thus, the school perspective maintains that schools that promote good maintenance of the school grounds and support both student-friendly school rules and regulations and positive student-teacher relationships are antithetical to school violence and bullying.

A variant of the school perspective is the view that school violence or bullying is symptomatic of a conscious or unconscious power dynamic or covert struggle between students, parents, and school personnel. Symptomatic of schools that are infected with the power dynamic are institutional tolerance of power struggles without active plans for resolution; student engagement in such antisocial activities as fights, drug/alcohol use, and gang recruitment activity; high rates of disciplinary referrals and suspensions; inordinate levels of teacher dissatisfaction; adversarial relationships between school personnel and the parents of problem children; low levels of parental involvement and proactive problem-solving; and overall poor institutional academic achievement.

While there is no systematic application of the school perspective to school bullying in Arab countries, the perspective has intuitive appeal in its relevance to school contexts that are punitive and authoritarian with respect to educating and disciplining students.

Group and Peer Pressure Perspective

The group and peer pressure perspective views student-driven bullying as a group dynamic that affects the process and outcome of peer victimization. The group and peer pressure perspective suggests that groups are typically formed in secondary schools, that individual
group members may be motivated by different needs and roles, and that members belonging to the in-group tend to bully those in the out-group for the purpose of achieving dominance in the in-group or for enhancing the in-group’s status or power. The group and peer pressure perspective also focuses on bystanders in the school bullying drama. Salminen has identified four roles of bystander peers that may assume in the group dynamic of bullying: assistant role (helping the bully group), reinforcer role (encouraging the bully group), outsider role (withdrawing from situation), and defender role (taking side or helping the victim group).

Consistent with the group and peer pressure perspective to bullying, empirical evidence shows that students rate their peers from their in-group more favorably than peers from their out-group and that in-groups tend to target weaker peers to establish superiority or to enhance their popularity within the in-group. Taken together, these findings explain why students tend to bully peers from their out-group and protect those belonging to their in-group.

While there is lack of a systematic application of the group and peer pressure view to school bullying in Arab countries, this social psychological perspective has considerable relevance to youth in collectivist cultures in which the self represents an appendage to the collective.

School bullying assessment

School bullying assessment methodologies allow sound evaluation of the scope of the problem in the organizational context for the purposes of understanding, planning, and evaluating comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying programs. Scientifically validated school bullying assessments entail systematic observations of frequency, duration and form of bullying in various locations, and/or administration of reliable, valid and standardized interviews, surveys and questionnaires. Self-report measures can be administered to stakeholders such as students, teachers and parents to elucidate the phenomenology of peer victimization, and to plan and evaluate school-based anti-bullying interventions. An example of a valid and widely used self-report measure is the 38-items Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ). The Olweus BVQ assesses the frequency and types of bullying, frequency of reporting of bullying incidents to teacher or family, and whether teachers intervene when bullying occurs. More specifically, the Olweus BVQ asks whether or not the student had been bullied or had bullied others in the “past couple of months.” Students who report being bullied “2 or 3 times a month” or more are classified as victims, a standard cutoff point recommended by Solberg and Olweus. The Olweus BVQ has been used in different countries including Greece, Italy, and Turkey, and with Arab-Americans in the United States.

The development of indigenous measures of school bullying in the Arab world or adaptation of existing measures are lacking. An exception is the Arabic translation and validation of the Peer Interaction in Primary School Questionnaire (PIPSQ) in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. As a measure of bullying and victimization, the Arabic translation of the PIPSQ was shown to have cultural and sex-based factorial invariance. The availability of psychometrically sound measures of school bullying in the Arabic language such as the Arabic version of the PIPSQ is a prerequisite for assessment and intervention initiatives in the Arab world.

School bullying prevention

A culture of bullying in schools is antithetical to the right of students and school personnel for a safe school environment. In many Western countries, national policies and legislation that prohibit harassment, intimidation, and all forms of bullying including cyber bullying are advanced (see appendix A), as are comprehensive school focused and evidence-based anti-bullying prevention programs.

While different school-based anti-bullying programs have been described, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program stands out as a universal initiative that targets elementary, middle and junior high schools to reduce bullying behavior. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program aims at restructuring the school environment as an arena for the occurrence and perpetuation of bullying, and comprises three main intervention components: individual, classroom, and school-wide. Individual-level interventions focus on individual perpetrators and victims, and often involve discussions between students, parents, teachers and counselors. For example, individual bullies may be trained in empathy while teachers and bystanders may be involved in self-efficacy training for the effective handling of bullying episodes. Class-level interventions involve classroom meetings about bullying and peer relations, establishment and enforcement of bullying-specific class rules, and teacher meetings with parents and students. Finally, school-wide interventions focus on the formation of a Bullying
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Prevention Coordinating Committee, confidential student assessments to evaluate the extent and nature of bullying within a particular school, development of specific school rules against bullying, increased student supervision at the times and locations where bullying is most likely to take place, and student-teacher conferences to discuss issues related to bullying and plan intervention strategies.

While culture-relevant program refinements may be required, large-scale evaluation studies indicate that the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program results in significant reductions not only in bullying and bullying victimization but also in such antisocial behaviors as vandalism, alcohol use, fighting and theft, as well as improvements in classroom order and more positive attitudes towards school work. Furthermore, in a meta-analysis comparing 30 different intervention programs, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program showed the most significant decrease in bullying behavior in schools in which it was adopted. The general effectiveness of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is consistent with the reported effectiveness of school-based programs intended to prevent violent behavior among school-age children and youth.

The design and implementation of school-based anti-bullying programs in the Arab world to reduce the harmful effects of bullying are lacking. In addition, and with exceptions such as the United Arab Emirates, there currently are no national visions that are antithetical to the culture of bullying in the school context. While some private schools such as the American Community School in Lebanon include in their student handbooks guidelines about dealing with bullying when it happens, national policies and legislation that support school-wide implementation of anti-bullying program initiatives for the eradication of the problem in the educational system in the Arab world are needed.

Summary and conclusions

School bullying is a serious issue that should be addressed at international and local levels. School bullying occurs in various Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In addition to the need for more systematic research on forms, signs, locations and consequences of school bullying, national policies and school-based anti-bullying program initiatives are required in the Arab world.

Appendix A

Bullying Legislation in Select Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy/Program, Date and Country</th>
<th>Schools' Responsibility</th>
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<tr>
<td>Policy/Program Memorandum No.144, 2009 - Ontario, Canada</td>
<td>The schools are required to include a school-wide bullying prevention plan as part of the School Improvement Plan in which they aim to define bullying, raise awareness about bullying, develop strategies to prevent bullying and intervene when it happens. These goals are reached through extensive training programs for all members of the school community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis of State Bullying Laws and Policies, U.S Department of Education, 2011 – United States of America</td>
<td>Most states have proposed requirements to develop district policies to prevent bullying and intervene in case it happens. Thirteen states argue that they have jurisdiction over bullying that happens off campus as it affects students at school. Each state has its own policies to deal with bullying but the main focus is on strategies to prevent bullying and develop intervention strategies in case it happens. Thirty-six states also have strategies to tackle cyberbullying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Charter for Democratic Schools Without Violence, 2004 – Europe</td>
<td>The main aim of the charter is to raise awareness about violence and train school staff and students to prevent occurrences of violence. In case of a violent incident, the schools are advised to tackle it immediately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Inspections Act, 2006 – United Kingdom</td>
<td>Schools must apply disciplinary measures to students who bully their peers. These measures must be fair, consistent and reasonable. It is also encouraged that schools involve parents and pupils in this process to educate them about bullying to prevent future occurrences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>لائحة الأنظمة السلوكية للطلبة بالمجتمع المدرسي – United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>The consequence of such undesirable behavior is to ban the student from attending classes for up to three days following which he is to be seen by the schools social worker and the school psychologist in order to prevent such future occurrences.</td>
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ملخص

الهدف: يعتبر العنف المدرسي مشكلة عالمية ذات تبعات أكاديمية، طبية، اجتماعية ونفسية جدية. إذا تهدف هذه الدراسة لمراجعة الظروف النفسية، الاجتماعية، والمدرسية المتعلقة بالعنف المدرسي في المشرق العربي، وتلك المقارنة لتحسين السياسات الوطنية وبرامج الأبحاث والبرامج المخصصة للمدارس. الطريقة: تم مراجعة الأبحاث الموجودة المتعلقة بالعنف المدرسي. النتيجة: بالرغم من أن ظاهرة العنف المدرسي كانت من المواضيع الشائعة للأوروبيين والأمريكيين الشماليين لعمر طويلة، فإن الاهتمام بالعنف المدرسي في العالم العربي هو ظاهرة حديثة. تشير الدراسات المقدمة إلى انتشار العنف المدرسي إلى أرقام متقاربة: 20.9% من الطلاب المراهقين في المدارس الإعدادية قد بلغوا عن عنف في الإمارات العربية المتحدة ، 31.9% في المغرب ، 33.6% في لبنان, 39.1% في عمان و44.2% في الأردن. وتبين أن الذكور أكثر تورطًا في العنف المدرسي مقارنة بالإمارات، الخلافة: ارتبطت هذه النتيجة مع مزيد من الأبحاث في المشرق العربي عن أشكال، علامات، مظاهر وتبعات العنف المدرسي، بالإضافة إلى السياسات الوطنية وبرامج الحد من العنف في المدارس.