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978-1-107-03189-0 - School Bullying in Different Cultures: Eastern and Western Perspectives

Edited by Peter K. Smith, Keumjoo Kwak and Yuichi Toda

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School Bullying in Different Cultures

School bullying is widely recognised as an international problem, but publications have focussed on the western tradition of research. A long tradition of research in Japan and South Korea and more recently in mainland China and Hong Kong, has had much less exposure. There are important and interesting differences in the nature of school bullying in eastern and western countries, as the first two parts of this book demonstrate. The third part examines possible reasons for these differences – methodological issues, school systems, societal values and linguistic issues. The final part looks at the implications for interventions to reduce school bullying and what we can learn from experiences in other countries. This is the first volume to bring together these perspectives on school bullying from a range of eastern as well as western countries.

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School Bullying in Different Cultures

Eastern and Western Perspectives

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Preface

School bullying is a universal phenomenon, but most of the research in the last thirty years has been in western countries. For example, the *Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective* (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010) has 41 chapters, only 2 of which represent perspectives outside Europe, North America and Australia (1 being comparative and 1 on Japan). A publication providing a systematic comparison of eastern and western approaches to the topic has been lacking; a gap which this book seeks to fill.

Over the last two decades, issues around school bullying and violence have come to take a major role in academic research, public debate and national policy. As part of a general movement internationally towards individual rights, the rights of pupils (and teachers and others in school) not to be attacked, abused or socially isolated has come to be recognised as a vital part of a democratic society and for pupil well-being, academic achievement and future functioning. Research on the topic has been reinvigorated and challenged in the last decade by the phenomenon of cyberbullying (via mobile phones and the Internet).

The study of school bullying has more than one origin (see Smith, 2014). It is conventionally seen as starting in Scandinavia (Sweden, Norway) with the writings of Heinemann and especially Olweus (see Chapter 1). The research topic spread through Western Europe, in the 1980s and 1990s. The European work also had an impact in some Commonwealth countries (especially Australia, New Zealand and Canada) since the 1980s and from the 1990s on, researchers in the United States have been explicitly researching school bullying (as opposed to earlier general research on aggression and school violence).

Quite separately, however, researchers and educators in Japan were concerned with the problems of *ijime*, a term very similar to bullying. Publications on *ijime* go back at least to the early 1980s and until the mid 1990s most Japanese researchers seemed unaware of the European research. There was, however, some contact with South Korean researchers, where there was also some older tradition of research

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(Koo, 2007). These separate traditions began to come together in the early 1990s. International cooperation organised by Morita in Japan led to a four-country cross-national survey (Japan, England, Norway, Netherlands) and the publication of two books, a Japanese version (Morita et al., 1999) and an English-language version (Smith et al., 1999).

Since then research on bullying in schools has become a more truly international endeavour. This has been marked by more academic interchange and by the involvement of international organisations. This book stems from collaboration amongst the three editors. Smith and Kwak jointly held a grant under the PMI2/British Council initiative (2008–2009), which allowed their research teams to meet and share knowledge of bullying work in the United Kingdom and the corresponding *wang-ta* in South Korea. Smith and Kwak also co-supervised the doctoral thesis of Hyojin Koo at Goldsmiths, on the topic of South Korean bullying. Smith and Toda participated in a workshop in Kobe, Japan in 2003 which Smith helped organise, and Smith and Morita jointly supervised the doctoral thesis of Tomoyuki Kanetsuna at Goldsmiths, which systematically compared *bullying* and *ijime*. All three editors had a role in the doctoral thesis of Alana James on peer support systems in England, South Korea and Japan. These prior endeavours feature in this book.

The greater international dimension of school bullying raises opportunities and challenges. The eastern and western traditions have different origins; so are we talking about the same phenomena? How similar or different are *ijime*, *wang-ta* and *bullying*? Is there a danger of western ethnocentrism in assuming a general similarity and not respecting differences? Also, what about China? Early research in China used western models (e.g. the Olweus questionnaire), but how appropriate are western research tools for measuring a quite different cultural reality? Even the pioneering cross-national study organised by Morita (1999) is open to this same concern.

This rush for commonality and disregard of differences was probably expectable and even perhaps necessary at the beginnings of international cooperation, but a decade or so later we need to (and are able to) step back and look more objectively at how different cultural and religious/philosophical traditions, recent history and the nature of school systems in different countries, can profoundly influence the nature of what may loosely be called ‘bullying’ phenomena. A recognition of diversity and difference may in fact help us to learn more effectively from each other, especially about practical measures to reduce ‘bullying’. We can learn from each other’s experiences, but not in simplistic ways; we need

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to more fully recognise cultural diversity than was done in the past. The rationale of this book is thus to explicitly confront and discuss such diversity.

The book is organised in four parts. Part I consists of chapters outlining the traditions of research on school bullying in major countries or blocks of countries: Europe, North America, Australasia, Japan, South Korea, mainland China and Hong Kong. In Part II we have examples of three studies where direct east/west comparisons are possible, using the same instruments or methodology. In Part III, four chapters discuss various issues involved in making cross-country comparisons – measurement issues, the nature of educational systems, societal values and characteristics and linguistic terms used. Part IV has contributions on the practical measures taken to combat school bullying in western countries, Japan, South Korea, mainland China and Hong Kong. A concluding editorial chapter reflects on what we have learnt on similarities and differences between bullying in eastern and western cultures, how we can explain these and their relevance for future research and practical action.

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Foreword

This exciting book finally brings together research done in the area of school bullying around the world – it is a much needed collection of insights and empirical findings based on studies many western researchers have not been very familiar with. Personally, I was very keen on getting to know better the work done in mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, and I believe that this volume is an inspiring read for anyone interested in the problem of bullying – especially for those interested in, or planning to do cross-cultural research on the topic.

To me, it is fascinating that researchers in eastern countries have paid attention to the group nature of bullying from early on, describing it as a ‘disease of the classroom’ (as mentioned by Toda in Chapter 4) rather than a problem of individual misbehaving children. Even the roles of students who witness bullying were of particular interest in a Japanese study by Morita and colleagues, before they truly entered the research agenda in the west. Also, many of the concepts used to refer to bullying in South Korea bear a strong connotation of abuse by the group rather than by an individual student. Whether this reflects a cultural understanding of the phenomenon or actual differences in how and by whom it is done (prevalence of different forms, for instance, does not always seem to tell the same story as perceptions of what kind of forms bullying involves) still leaves room for further research.

Overall, there seem to be many similarities in the understanding of bullying, the forms it takes, its correlates, as well as gender differences and developmental changes in it. Although also differences between eastern and western cultures are found, they often leave some doubt concerning equivalence in samples and measurement issues. Reading about prevalence differences makes one think about the large differences found in the prevalence of bullying and victimisation even within European countries. Taking this variation into account, the prevalence of bullying actually does not seem to differ much from east to west; to me, the similarities are perhaps more striking than the differences.

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Having said that, as there are known variations across classrooms and (to a lesser extent) schools in the prevalence and dynamics of bullying (for instance, more bullying in hierarchical classrooms or in classrooms where teachers do not have strong antibullying attitudes or they do not express such attitudes to students), such differences probably exist across wider cultural contexts as well. The interesting question is, what are the proximal factors (perhaps at the school level, or at the teacher/classroom level) that mediate such cultural influences on the dynamics of bullying.

There are obviously many exciting avenues for future research on bullying in eastern and western cultures. Before taking too many steps forward, however, there is also a need for a step backward, a careful look at methodological issues, such as measurement properties of the constructs across cultures. Before that, there is no guarantee that possible cross-cultural differences found in the associations between bullying and other constructs are not merely artefacts of measurement invariance. The chapter by Guillaume and Funder (Chapter 11) nicely highlights this need, as well as other important issues that need consideration when making cross-cultural comparisons. It is actually surprising that neither confirmatory factor analyses with the basic questionnaires nor forced-choice measures such as Q-sort techniques have been utilised in studying bullying across cultures. Also the implicit association test (IAT) comes to mind as a possible approach when examining bullying-related emotions or attitudes. This volume certainly provides a wonderful overview of what has been done so far and a great inspiration for those intending to take the exciting next steps.

Christina Salmivalli
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Foreword

The phenomenon of ‘bullying’ can be found in any society at any time. It can be described as ‘the phenomenon that can sneak up on any human relationships and groups that we form, like a shadow’. Does this mean that bullying is something that we, as a human being, must accept, like ‘karma’? Is it something we cannot do anything about, but just put up with? It is quite understandable that comparative ethologists, at a very early stage of bullying research, found the primordial aggression of human beings (considered as an animal species) as an underlying reason for this phenomenon.

However, even if we concede that bullying is an inevitable karma that lurks deep within human nature, whether it is developed or inhibited should still depend on our perception and behaviour towards the phenomenon, namely educational approaches in a broader sense by families, schools and society as a whole. In fact, when we look around the world, the occurrence of the phenomenon and the process by which it becomes a social problem varies by society, time, education and the type and level of measures taken against it by adults.

Because of such differences and variations, we should not conclude that the problem of bullying is an inevitable karma of human nature, and give up trying to reduce it. We do not reject examining the darker reaches of human nature, but by revealing the common and uncommon features of bullying in each society, we can consider how we can tackle the problem together, and develop educational approaches against it. This is the biggest implication of this book.

Almost all sorts of so-called social problems, including bullying, can be characterised as being socially built up; people’s attention is drawn to them by claims that it is something bad, unforgivable, unacceptable, sick or extraordinary. Thus, the fact that the phenomenon of bullying exists in a particular society and the fact that bullying is regarded as a social problem in that society are two different things.

For example, *ijime* (the most similar concept to *bullying* in Japan) is often claimed to have a less visible structure, and because of that, we base

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our judgment of the occurrence of *ijime* on the subjective emotions of victims. In such a situation, whether or not *ijime* becomes a social problem in Japanese society depends on the level and diversity of people's attention to the problem. If people lack concern for the problem, they remain ignorant about it, and no measures are taken against it.

Varying levels of people's attention, in turn, make a difference as to how the problem would be perceived and what measures would be taken in a particular society as a whole. However, this is not merely the problem of a particular society. Instead, we can understand the diversity of the problem of bullying and derive the measures to tackle it through the kinds of social comparisons which this book aims for. For example, *iljinhoe* (school gangsters) in South Korea appears at a glance to be based on the local conditions and climate of schools in South Korea, but we can still learn about the basic nature of school gangsters, which many societies have similar problems with, and about how we should tackle such problems from these local cases.

Measures against *ijime* in Japan often place a disproportionate emphasis on saving victims, but measures and mechanisms targeted more on citizenship education by questioning perpetrators over the responsibility for their negative behaviours, as is often done in Western countries, could give us a new perspective on tackling *ijime* in Japan. Measures against school violence as well as a national debate on a code of student rights and authority of teachers in South Korea could be another example which can be used as a useful reference for considering human rights education at schools in Japan.

When we look at such local cases, we must be careful not to focus too much on unique characteristics of a particular cultural setting or society, and thus to ignore the hidden common features. Bullying can be found in any society or culture at any time, so even if its manifestation appears as unique characteristics of a particular culture or society, it is important for us to continue research to find out common features and mechanisms, and to attempt to generalise scientific findings about it.

There have been studies of bullying in various countries all over the world, and some common features and characteristics of bullying have been found from such studies. One of these features is that the abuse of 'asymmetric power' is related to the mechanism of the occurrence of bullying. 'Asymmetric power' can be understood as a 'force' which is an essential element for us as we interact with others, manage groups and form a society. This element can also be found in the definition of bullying and can be considered as a premise of universality of bullying (Morita, 2010). Because it is an essential element for everyday life, it is deeply related to various socio-cultural elements such as our lifestyle,

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interpersonal- and group-relationships based on politics, economics, culture and religions, and this can be considered to be reflected in the occurrence of bullying, people's attention towards it and the diversity of approaches to the problems in a particular society.

If we understand the basic element of bullying as the 'abuse of power', bullying will not be limited to the problem of children. Social problems in adult society such as power harassment, sexual harassment, domestic violence, child abuse and so on can all be occurred under the same mechanism. In other words, tackling bullying involves facing the common problems for adults and children to form peaceful, secure and comfortable interpersonal relationships within society.

Comparing bullying in various countries, there are societies where bullying can be stopped more easily and societies where bullying can hardly be stopped at all. The differences between these societies reflect the differences in the sensibility and educational levels of schools, families and society as a whole and the levels of maturation of awareness of people, both adults and children, living in a particular society. I believe this book fills an important gap in bringing together perspectives on bullying from a range of eastern and western cultures. I hope it will contribute to the continuing endeavour for each country to train better citizens and to form better societies.

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