Journal of Adolescence 69 (2018) 72–79

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/adolescence

The parallel culture of bullying in polish secondary schools: A grounded theory study

Małgorzata Wójcik

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Katowice, ul. Techników 9, 40-326, Katowice, Poland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Bullying culture
Exclusion markers
Bullying rituals
Bullying code
Grounded theory

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Bullying is a universal phenomenon observed in all schools worldwide, with as many as 35% of students being involved in bullying. Group context is crucial for understanding and preventing bullying, as peers are often present in bullying situations and have key roles in maintaining, preventing, or stopping it. The aims of this study were to investigate school bullying as a social phenomenon in Poland and to understand how Polish adolescents perceive, discuss, and make sense of bullying in their communities.

Methods: I carried out fieldwork at three public secondary schools in a city in southern Poland, and conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 26 students aged 16/17 (16 girls, 10 boys). I used the grounded theory approach to analyze the data, as it offered an opportunity for deeper understanding of adolescents' social context and culture, with intragroup interactions playing a central role.

Results & conclusions: The results suggest that a parallel culture of bullying at the micro level is created at these schools, which includes norms; a multi-stage process of victim creation; and rituals confirming the victim's status, group coherence, and other students' attitudes and roles in the bullying. In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest that it could prove beneficial to plan anti-bullying programs with adolescents themselves, as they could clarify the contexts, situations, or triggers that might lead to bullying.

Traditionally, bullying has been defined as repeated actions of aggression, harassment, or exclusion. It has negative health and psychosocial consequences for all students involved (DeLara, 2018; Olweus, 2002; Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009) and is one of the most distressing experiences for a child or adolescent, especially when it occurs repeatedly over a prolonged period (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Wójcik & Kozak, 2015). Bullying seems universal—it is observed in nearly all schools worldwide (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wójcik & Hełka, 2018). According to a review of 80 studies, involvement in traditional bullying and cyberbullying has a prevalence of 35% and 15%, respectively (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014).

Recently, scholars have underlined the importance of considering the social context of bullying (Horton, 2011, 2016; Patton, Hong, Patel, & Kral, 2017; Salmivalli, 2010, 2014; Thornberg, 2017; Thornberg, Landgren, & Wiman, 2018). There is a particular need to analyze the school and peer context, culture norms, power, and interaction patterns, and to consider bullying as an interactive social process. Bullying is not an isolated interpersonal phenomenon, but a sociocultural one that depends strongly on peers' and adults' actions in particular social settings. Students' roles and reactions in bullying situations, and the variations in bullying that occur across class units, depend mainly on how students interpret the context and how they judge themselves from the viewpoint of their class or peer group (Salmivalli, 2014; Thornberg, 2011; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018; Wójcik & Mondry, 2017). As Horton

E-mail address: mgolonka-wojcik@swps.edu.pl.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.09.005
Received 29 June 2018; Received in revised form 4 September 2018; Accepted 17 September 2018

(2011) suggests, it may be more useful to conceptualize bullying as a social phenomenon that involves ordinary children in unique situations, as opposed to assuming that a large number of children are merely aggressive or "evil-minded."

Researchers are increasingly examining the contextual factors and social processes of bullying. While there is much research on the variables associated with students' behaviors in bullying situations (Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014; Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014; Mazzone, Camodeca, & Salmivalli, 2016; Thornberg & Jungert, 2013; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018; Yun & Graham, 2018), most of these studies adopted quantitative methods. Although these methods provide crucial information about bullying and students' actions, they limit opportunities to discuss bullying from students' own unique viewpoints.

Some researchers have been seeking to address this gap by using qualitative methods, which enable them to study bullying as a social process and develop an understanding of the culture and group processes involved from students' perspectives. Thornberg's (2011) review of qualitative research on bullying, and several recent studies (Forsberg et al., 2016; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Mazzone, Thornberg, Stefanelli, Cadei, & Caravita, 2018; Thornberg et al., 2018), paint a complex picture of how cultural patterns, labelling and stigma processes, power structures, social hierarchies, exclusion and inclusion processes, and the social ordering of belonging can contribute to bullying. However, Forsberg, Thornberg, and Samuelsson (2014) claim that this picture is incomplete; we simply have too little information about what students themselves associate with excluding and pro-bullying behavior and how they interpret the opportunities, constraints, and bystander actions during bullying incidents. Many students do not agree with adults concerning what behaviors should be regarded as bullying (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999; DeLara, 2012; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2017; Hellström, Persson, & Hagquist, 2015). Vaillancourt et al. (2008), for example, found that when defining bullying, students did not focus on intentionality, repetition, or power imbalance, but rather on specific bullying incidents. Younger children, for example, focused on physical and verbal aggression, while adolescents focused on relational aggression, especially excluding behaviors. Such a tendency is present not only in studies focusing on bullying but also in studies on other aspects of adolescents' lives, such as risky behaviors. As Rodham, Brewer, Mistral, and Stallard (2006) noted, most studies have concentrated on the frequency of engaging in a particular risky behavior but miss out on what "risk" means to adolescents. Thus, it is crucial to carry out further research that gives students the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their own understanding of bullying, its context, and the way they perceive interpersonal relations within a peer group, which, for them, is "the half-way house between the family and the adult world" (and thus of vital importance; Gay, 1992, p. 207, p. 207).

Such research may be particularly necessary in Poland, as there are currently few studies exploring Polish adolescents' perspectives on bullying and its context (Tłuściak-Deliowska, 2018; Wójcik & Mondry, 2017). Therefore, I investigated the main concerns and perspectives of Polish adolescents on bullying.

The current study implemented a social-ecological perspective on bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, 2004; Horton, 2016; Mazzone et al., 2018; Thornberg, 2015, 2017), according to which peer victimization is a social phenomenon established and maintained by the complex interplay of contextual and individual factors, and deeply embedded within the school and class context (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003; Thornberg & Wänström, 2018). Social-ecological theory conceptualizes adolescents' social environment as comprising various interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), including the microsystem (i.e., individuals or groups with whom the adolescent interacts in the immediate environment), mesosystem (i.e., interrelations among microsystems, such as the influences of school, teaching, and administrative staff), and macrosystem (i.e., a cultural blueprint that determines the choices and activities of the microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). I focus on the microsystem—adolescents' behavior is arguably most influenced this system, particularly their peer group (Espelage, 2014; Horton, 2016), and adolescents are considered active agents in the construction of their own micro-level culture, which is collectively produced and shared with significant others (Corsaro, 2005). Accordingly, bullying is considered a collective action embracing social roles, stigmatization, co-constructions of meaning, and social ordering processes (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Garandeau et al., 2014; Thornberg, 2007, 2011). Understanding adolescents' perspectives on bullying can help researchers recognize the settings in which bullying is strengthened, and determine why some students are more prone to bullying involvement.

My main intentions were to investigate school bullying as a social phenomenon and to understand how Polish secondary school students (aged 16–18) perceive, discuss, and make sense of bullying in their community. I used the grounded theory approach, as it allows for a deeper understanding of adolescents' social context and culture, with intragroup interactions playing central roles (Swearer & Doll, 2001). It can also help explore bullying as a set of social processes in the everyday context (Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006) and determine the interaction, interpretation, and meaning of those processes (Charmaz, 2017).

1. Method

1.1. Participants

The Polish school system begins with preschool at around age 6, followed by 12 years of compulsory schooling: six years of primary school (age 7–12), three of middle school (age 13–15), and three of secondary school (age 16–18). Classrooms are constant units for all of secondary school, with students remaining together for all or most of their courses. I examined only secondary school students. Following approval by the university research ethics committee, a convenience sample of five secondary schools was selected from the city board of education. Head teachers were contacted, and the research aims and procedure explained. Three schools agreed to participate, after which ethical procedures and dates for data collection were arranged. Students were recruited by asking them to volunteer; 32 adolescents ultimately volunteered. However, four parents did not permit their children to participate, and two students were absent during data collection due to illness, so only 26 participants aged 16/17 (16 girls, 10 boys) were

interviewed. Socioeconomic data for individual students were not collected. Considering the schools' locations, the sample was primarily middle class and all of Polish origin, thus indicating homogeneity. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

1.2. Procedure

All data were collected via semi-structured interviews between October and December 2017. I told each participant that the interviews would focus on intragroup/interpersonal relations at school, including both the positive and negative aspects (including bullying). I reminded them that the interview was confidential and would be recorded, and emphasized that there were no wrong answers and that they were all experts in their field. While I used an interview guide, I allowed participants to determine what they wanted to discuss and let their perceptions emerge naturally during the course of conversation. The adolescents directed the discussions to ensure that the emerging themes were not a reflection of the interview scenario. Each interview began with open-ended questions such as “Tell me about your class” and “What are the most and least favorite aspects of school for you?” I followed these with probing questions to clarify adolescents' descriptions and interpretations of school social life, and asked them to talk about bullying at school in any way they wanted. At the end of each interview, adolescents had time to add anything they felt the needed to, ask questions, or express doubts. Because students might talk about sensitive issues, become upset, or disclose personal facts, I took arranged for the school psychologist to be available to support students after the interview. Each interview (average time 49.9 min) was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

1.3. Author positioning

I tried to avoid adopting a “teacher-like” authority role (Matthews, 2001), instead attempting a “least-adult” role (Mandell, 1991) to enable open, reflective communication. I tried to cultivate a relaxed atmosphere by carrying out interviews in the student council room. I emphasized that I was a guest, not a teacher, who wanted to know what it was like to be a student.

1.4. Data analysis

A qualitative approach enabled me to richly explore participants' experiences, understanding, and meaning-making (Chamberlain, 1999). Initially, the interview transcripts were analyzed by NVivo 11 using the techniques of the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017). Particularly, I employed coding (creating qualitative codes and categories grounded in data), memo writing (writing down ideas about relationships between codes and other theoretical concepts that came to mind during the coding), and memo sorting. First, I performed open coding—breaking down the data into meaning units—by naming words, lines, and segments of data. This was guided via analytical questions (Charmaz, 2017) such as “What do the data suggest?” and “How do participants perceive their classes?” The central theme in adolescents' discourse was the organization of their social world within class units. They also talked about the concepts of fitting and misfitting, and the behavior patterns connected thereto. Second, I carried out focused coding by asking questions such as “How is class life organized?” “How is fitting/misfitting understood?” “How do bullying cases start and develop?” and “What are the behavior patterns?” Adolescents appeared to perceive their classroom social life as a system governed by fixed, unchangeable principles manifesting themselves as common norms and rules; shared understanding of normality and oddness; collective construction of victims; and excluding and bullying rituals. These concepts delimited and guided the further work. Finally, theoretical coding (Glaser, 2005) was conducted to explore how the core concepts and constructed codes were interlinked, which yielded a grounded theory.

2. Results

The systematic analysis generated a grounded theory of a parallel culture of bullying as a social phenomenon—that is, implanted within social forces that create the local class culture and generate the opportunity for bullying to occur and remain. The results are presented in three sections: First, I explore how adolescents understood and discussed group norms concerning bullying and peer group exclusion. Second, I examine the collective creation of multi-deviant victims. Finally, I examine adolescents' interpretation of bullying incidents as rituals, acknowledging class norms, group coherence, and the victim's position.

2.1. Group norms of bullying and peer group exclusion

It became clear that adolescents were all aware of bullying and could easily recall bullying incidents (including their contexts and participants). Moreover, all participants were willing to describe their role in the bullying. Six participants were victims in primary and middle school, and one was a victim at the time of the interview; four admitted to having been bullies or bully assistants in the past; fourteen had witnessed bullying as passive bystanders; and two supported bullies by laughing and cheering during bullying.

When asked to explain why they believed bullying occurred at school, each respondent gave several reasons but the majority (including those with victimization experience) said that the main reason is that a victim is “different, not normal; behaves in a strange way; looks different; acts in an unexpected way; doesn't follow the rules.” The second reason was peer pressure and the need to adhere to group norms. Adolescents focused on difference versus normality to legitimize the resulting attitudes and behaviors related to bullying. They employed culturally appreciated features and macro-level cultural norms to define criteria for inclusion and

exclusion, which confirms the results from previous research (Thornberg, 2017). The macro-level fat-phobic norm (Lupton, 2013) was often mentioned, especially when describing girl victims (by both boys and girls), as an undeniable reason for bullying. For example, two different adolescents said the following: “One girl was bullied back in middle school but she was fat and ugly. She didn't take care of herself as a girl should.” “I was bullied in 5th and 6th grade because I was fat. Then during the holidays I went on a boot-camp for fatties and lost a lot of weight so when I got back to middle school no one bullied me anymore.”

A predominant norm for fitting into a group, which appeared only in boys' discussion about other boys, was “toughness,” which I understood as the ability to deal with difficult interpersonal situations in one's peer group, such as standing up for oneself, being assertive, and being resilient. Being weak and sensitive, on the other hand, was one reason that students did not fit in, and thus for exclusion and bullying. Several boys said, for example: “When you are a guy you need to be tough, not show that you worry or that something offended you.” “They teased me but I just defended myself and didn't let them do it. Not like the other guy (who was bullied) who just cried every time somebody called him gay or when he got an F. Pathetic.” “Being girlish is unacceptable, it's a shortcut to being bullied; no doubt about it.”

When discussing their school and social life, adolescents seemed to create specific patterns using norms from the macrosystem and mesosystem levels. They picked these norms selectively, adjusted them by adding certain conditions, and then implemented them within their class culture. The adolescents perceived bullying as wrong on both the macrosystem and mesosystem levels, generally agreeing that: “You don't bully at school; bullying is wrong. You shouldn't hurt others.” Nevertheless, when discussing actual bullying cases and incidents from their experience, they seemed to analyze the incidents on a microsystem level, utilizing the norm that referred to fitting in. The macrosystem and mesosystem norm of “Don't bully others” appeared to have been superseded by the microsystem norm “fit in and be normal”: “Sure, you don't bully and you should help others when they are in trouble; but he (a bullied boy) provoked us by saying stupid things, you just couldn't do nothing.” “Yeah I know, the rule is you don't call people fat; but what if she was fat? Were we to call her slim? If she was fat, she was fat; end of story.” Similarly, students who were victims said, “I was bullied because I was different; they bullied me because I was fat then.” “I think I was a victim because I wasn't sporty while other boys from my class were very much into football.”

Selectively chosen norms were made into local class codes of conduct that included approved standards regarding “fitting and misfitting” and the consequences of the latter. Noticeably, they used the same way of expressing themselves (i.e., grammar and structure) to describe the local class code on interpersonal regulations and other norms concerning, for example, safety, organization, homework, and assessment of knowledge: “Those who don't know how to behave are ignored and excluded.” “You are never late for class.” “You don't hang out with weirdos as you never know what they might do.” “If you're not a good student that's your business, but you shouldn't interrupt others. If they want to pay attention, well that's their business.” “You are loyal to your friends, no matter what.”

Moreover, when describing both sets of norms, adolescents left little room for interpretation: “No drugs and alcohol at school—that's obvious.” “If you choose to be different you are out—no question about it.” “If you play truant, you are obviously in trouble.” “Weirdos are bullied—that's the way it is.” “When you are a fat girl, you are screwed; everybody knows it, I knew it. That's why I worked my ass off to lose weight. Now I am ok.” As in Ellwood and Davies's (2010) study, adolescents were consistent and presented their class codes as undisputable, creatively interplaying adult and peer normativities.

These results accord with Dixon, Smith, and Jenks (2008), which showed that group norms played a substantial role in students' behavior and hierarchy within the group. Additionally, Corsaro (2005) suggested that students create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by drawing information from the adult world to address peer context and concerns. How power is distributed, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, guidelines on peer relationship, and rules on punishments and rewards must be clear and incontestable (Schein, 2004). Similarly, Thornberg (2017) found that children used both macrosystem-level cultural norms and categories as well as microsystem-level norms and categories in selective and creative ways to produce fitting and misfitting. The discourse on fitting and misfitting norms seems of primary importance, as it is linked with social exclusion anxiety and the fear of social death conceptualized by Søndergaard (2012) and confirmed by Thornberg (2017), who showed that students considered being excluded, bullied, or having no friends as the worst conditions for them at school.

2.2. Stages of collective creation of a multi-deviant victim

Because all adolescents declared being involved in or witnessing bullying, I asked them to talk about victimized students. They were able to recall the collective process of constructing a victim. Bullying began with pointing out or joking about a misfitting feature or behavior: “We started calling her Miss Piggy.” “A new boy came and somebody joked about his backpack which was a pinkish color.” “That girl had acne and Mark called her ‘pizza’; it started from there.” “She came from Armenia, and at the beginning of first grade someone joked that she was a terrorist. From that moment nobody even wanted to sit with her.” The next step for all such cases was social isolation, victimization, and bullying, with increasingly more students joining in as assistants, henchmen/followers, passive supporters, or disengaged onlookers (Salmivalli, 2010; 2014). This process was characterized by the accumulation of multiple deviant characteristics of the victim. One adolescent described a bullied girl from Armenia: Her bullying began with the rumor that she was a terrorist, which progressed to negative physical characteristics (“fat,” “dark skin,” “strange clothes”) and other details (“she walked in a strange way,” “ate banana sandwiches,” “didn't have a smartphone,” “didn't participate in PE lessons,” “had five brothers.”). For the boy whose bullying started with comments on his backpack, subsequent comments focused on his being “weak,” girlish,” sensitive,” and “wimpy,” and then on how he was “too skinny,” “couldn't play football,” and “wore the same trousers every day.” The next stage of victim construction involved telling stories about the victims, which ultimately expanded to include the victim's past, friends, or family: “We heard that someone in his family had a hereditary mental illness.” “They said her boyfriend

made her show her private parts on the internet." "We heard he had had an emotional breakdown."

In analyzing the adolescents' discourse on victim construction, I noticed that the process always began with primary exclusion markers—qualities relating to misfitting or that are negatively viewed within the macro culture. Being fat, unfashionable, sick, of a different race, not tough and girlish (for boys), or sloppy and not feminine (for girls) were all primary excluding features, which accord with past research in Poland and elsewhere (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Wójcik & Hełka, 2018). Following these primary features, adolescents assigned secondary exclusion markers to the local class culture—eating banana sandwiches or being too skinny was not embarrassing unless it was done by somebody already described as "fat and having dark skin" or "weak and girlish."

This process of creating a multi-deviant victim was noted by Thornberg (2010a, 2017), who identified four phases of victimizing and showed that misfitting was the main theme in creating deviant peers. Our study adds to his work by showing that the stages of misfitting are consecutive and complemented by a story-telling stage that ultimately isolates the victim from social interaction with the majority of the class. As Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) indicate, isolation relates to the drawing of clear boundaries and constructing juxtapositions. One respondent said, "I had nothing against him, but you wouldn't want to talk to somebody who was from a family of freaks." His decision to not interact with the victim was thus influenced by the latter's reputation created through story-telling and preceded by primary and secondary exclusion markers. The reputation of the victim is based on what is said about them and the stories that are heard about him or her, related to peer rejection (Boulton, 2013; Graham, Bellmore, & Juvonen, 2003). Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003) similarly noted that children often separate victims from other students, constructing him/her as negatively deviant and thus deserving of hostility.

2.3. Bullying incidents as rituals confirming norms and victims' position

Adolescents noted two kinds of bullying. One involved the openly hostile acts of physical, verbal, relational or cyber aggression reported in past studies (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Wójcik & Hełka, 2018), while the second, grounded in local class culture, comprised secret codes and collusive communication acts performed in both the real and virtual worlds. That is, each class created idiosyncratic *rituals* with multiple purposes. Primarily, these rituals confirmed victims' statuses by stigmatizing, excluding, humiliating, tricking, or annoying them. They also conned teachers by mispresenting certain behaviors and using double messages. One victimized adolescent reported: "They had a way of greeting me to show their disgust and the fact that I was not welcome. Normally they would say '*cześć*' (hi), but to me they always said '*czeeeść*' (hiiii) with a strange voice pitch and a kind of look. Yeah, they also pretended to agree with me when I said something in class – but I knew it was mocking and felt so humiliated; the teachers had no idea." Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) noted a similar case of double-message greetings, where the pitch of the greeting expressed derision, which teachers appeared unable to pick up on. Another adolescent who admitted to having supported bullying said, "Most of the time we ignored her and laughed at her when there were no teachers around. But we also asked innocent questions, like 'how's your boyfriend? or 'what's for dinner?' And she sort of blushed all over her face. I thought teachers hadn't noticed but now I think they wanted to be blind."

These rituals also strengthened the feeling of collectivity among the bullying participants and expressed the shared understanding or emotional attitudes of the class (Lesko, 1988), as well as facilitated the continuation of the bullying (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008). This was clearly visible from descriptions of cyberbullying incidents. "So it was like this: we had this class Facebook group, and someone would provoke Tomek (the bullied boy) to comment and then someone else would comment back in a nasty or rude way saying something like 'you stupid idiot' and then everyone 'liked' this nasty comment." "All of us except Ania (the bullied girl) got an invitation to go somewhere together and she could see that she was the only one not invited – and knew that everyone noticed that she was not invited."

Such rituals often involved expressing strongly negative messages phrased in socially acceptable or neutral ways, making it difficult for victims to react despite knowing that the message was intended to humiliate, ridicule, or offend. Misrepresentation rituals guarantee that teachers would not intervene, as there was no evidence of bullying (Smith & Sharp, 1995; Wood, Smith, Varjas, & Meyers, 2017). Furthermore, bystanders would not react because the situation was too ambiguous (Wójcik et al., 2015) and the victim would not report being victimized because the real meaning of these messages was understood only by class members (DeLara, 2012). As a former victim put it: "What was I supposed to say – that they say 'czeeeść' and look at me in a weird way? My class teacher would only laugh at me and make things worse."

Along these lines, I should mention teachers' complicity in bullying. It may derive from institutional constraints—class sizes and increasing demands on teachers to get through required course content, which hinders their involvement in relational issues (Horton, 2011). It may also stem from a reluctance or incompetence in dealing with class dynamics or bullying incidents (Wójcik, Hełka, Kozak, Wośko, & Błońska, 2016).

Overall, the rituals helped facilitate the continuation of bullying, retain a negotiated order, and make it difficult for any one student to counteract the bullying because they publicly highlighted each student's participation. The displayed class attitude towards the victim in some instances provoked the victim to react by crying or becoming angry, hiding in the bathroom, or blushing, etc., which legitimized their perception of his/her "weirdness" or "otherness."

3. Discussion

Despite the small scale of this qualitative study, its findings paint a picture of the processes involved in creating and maintaining a culture allowing bullying to occur and continue. This picture, of course, has no general applicability; rather, it is an interpretative portrayal (Charmaz, 2017) of bullying in Polish schools that may assist our understanding of the phenomenon in other countries.

Generally, my findings clarify how a culture of bullying at the microsystem level is created and includes norms, multistage processes of victim creation, and rituals confirming the victim's status and group coherence, as well as other students' attitudes and roles in the bullying.

The bullying culture seems to operate in parallel to mesosystem cultural norms. The demands of the peer culture particularly appear to be at odds with the school rules ("You don't bully at school"; "bullying is so wrong"; "you shouldn't hurt others"; "you don't call people fat"), thus creating conflicting demands: adolescents may understand the need for group members to behave normatively and the danger of rejection in failing to adhere to these norms (Jones, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2011; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004; Wójcik & Hełka, 2018) but also evaluate bullying as morally wrong (Forsberg et al., 2016; Song & Oh, 2017; Thornberg, 2015; Thornberg et al., 2018). Thus, by creating a complementary set of norms and rules that do not contradict school norms but rather function in parallel ("don't bully those who fit in"), students navigate the conflicting demands of being a good person and being accepted by peers. This complex process of creating rules, norms, and codes of conduct at the microsystem level allows adolescents to both disapprove of and contribute to bullying simultaneously. Potentially, the way a class code is created and presented by adolescents not only hinders each student's action against bullying, but also serves as a moral disengagement strategy (Bandura, 1999)—that is, the socio-cognitive process through which people disengage from humane acts and behave inhumanely towards others. This could permit adolescents to disengage from moral standards without guilt and self-condemnation; alternatively, it might involve a re-construal of the bullying so that it is not viewed as immoral, or detaching and obscuring oneself from personal responsibility for bullying or not defending the victim (Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2014; Thornberg et al., 2018). Understanding these processes is a matter of further research.

The findings confirm that fitting/misfitting is central for bullying (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010a, 2015, 2017). This is reflected in the local class codes that underline adolescents' behavior. The collective decision to isolate and bully someone is not made overnight; rather it is influenced by a reputation created through story-telling, preceded by primary and secondary exclusion markers. As in previous studies, victims were socially constructed as deviant (Mazzone et al., 2018; Thornberg, 2015, 2017) through certain behaviors called "the odd student repertoire" (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003) as the group maintained normative orders. The adolescents in this study described this process as a domino effect initiated by pointing out or joking about a misfitting feature or behavior, which progressed to identifying additional exclusion features and ended by telling stories to attract supporters and make the victim's friends leave him/her. As in Viala (2014) and Thornberg (2015), victims were confined to negative labeling through name-calling, rumor spreading, and creating a bad reputation. The peer discourse on bullying subsequently created social expectations that trapped the victims in a self-fulfilling prophecy—they became nothing more than their bullying-induced labels to classmates.

Detecting the paths leading to long-term victimization before actually reaching this stage seems crucial for bullying prevention. As Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) suggested, bullying must not be regarded as a longstanding process but as one executed in small interactive incidents that form months-long continuous chains of bullying. It is particularly essential to arrest the process before it reaches the story-telling phase. They appeared to function as a self-driving, self-serving group with rituals in which participating students manifested and maintained their common "normality" by repetitively designating the victim as "not like us" (Salmivalli, 2018; Thornberg, 2015; Wójcik & Kozak, 2015; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015). Overall, the findings may help teachers identify and understand those small incidents, which at first glance might appear invalid but, to the students, are consecutive stages of a process leading to long-term bullying.

3.1. Limitations of the study

This study must be considered in light of its limitations. First, in qualitative interviews, there is a high risk of social desirability bias compared to anonymous questionnaires, especially when students are asked by adults to talk about interpersonal relations. Moreover, the results were built on analyses of adolescents' self-reported experiences and did not involve the observations or perspectives of teachers or school personnel. Further comparable qualitative studies should be carried to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the bullying processes and culture. Additionally, we focused on adolescents from Poland, who may differ from adolescents in other countries because of contextual and cultural variations across countries and educational systems. Further research could examine how students discriminate between, reason about, and differently value school rules; how the development of local class codes influence moral disengagement mechanisms; and how such codes affect individual students.

3.2. Practical implications

In terms of policy implications, my findings suggest that effective prevention or intervention is possible only after the bullying process is fully understood. It could prove beneficial to plan anti-bullying programs through collaborating with adolescents themselves (Wójcik & Hełka, 2018; Wójcik & Mondry, 2017) as they could indicate contexts, situations, or triggers that might lead to bullying. This could allow for the development of effective countermeasures to prevent or interrupt behaviors associated with bullying before they become permanent.

4. Conclusion

The culture of bullying at the class level is created and operates in parallel with the mesosystem cultural norms. This parallel culture includes a complementary set of norms and rules that do not contradict school norms but function in parallel; a multi-stage,

domino-effect process of victim creation; and rituals confirming the victim's status, group coherence, and other students' attitudes and roles in bullying.

References

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3*(3), 193–209.

Bosacki, S. L., Marini, Z. A., & Dane, A. V. (2006). Voices from the classroom: Pictorial and narrative representations of children's bullying experiences. *Journal of Moral Education, 35*(2), 231–245.

Boulton, M. J. (2013). The effects of victim of bullying reputation on adolescents' choice of friends: Mediation by fear of becoming a victim of bullying, moderation by victim status, and implications for befriending interventions. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 114*, 146–160. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2012.05.001.

Boulton, M. J., Bucci, E., & Hawker, D. D. (1999). Swedish and English secondary school pupils' attitudes towards, and conceptions of, bullying: Concurrent links with bully/victim involvement. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 40*(4), 277–284.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*, 513–531. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.32.7.513.

Cappadocia, M. C., Pepler, D., Cummings, J. G., & Craig, W. (2012). Individual motivations and characteristics associated with bystander intervention during bullying episodes among children and youth. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 27*, 201–216. https://doi.org/10.1177/0829573512450567.

Chamberlain, K. (1999). Using grounded theory in health psychology. In M. Murray, & K. Chamberlain (Eds.). *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods* (pp. 183–291). London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217870.n12.

Charmaz, K. (2017). The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry, 23*, 34–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657105.

Corsaro, W. A. (2005). Collective action and agency in young children's peer cultures. In J. Qvortrup (Ed.). *Studies in modern childhood* (pp. 231–247). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504929_14.

DeLara, E. W. (2012). Why adolescents don't disclose incidents of bullying and harassment. *Journal of School Violence, 11*(4), 288–305.

DeLara, E. W. (2018). Consequences of childhood bullying on mental health and relationships for young adults. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1197-y Advance online publication.

Dixon, R., Smith, P., & Jenks, C. (2008). Bullying and difference. *Journal of School Violence, 3*, 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1300/J202v03n04_04.

Ellwood, C., & Davies, B. (2010). Violence and the moral order in contemporary schooling: A discursive analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 7*, 85–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780880802477598.

Espelage, D. L. (2014). Ecological theory: Preventing youth bullying, aggression, and victimization. *Theory into Practice, 53*(4), 257–264.

Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2003). Research on school bullying and victimization: What have we learned and where do we go from here? *School Psychology Review, 32*(3), 365–385.

Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2004). *Bullying in American schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Forsberg, C., & Thornberg, R. (2016). The social ordering of belonging: Children's perspectives on bullying. *International Journal of Educational Research, 78*, 13–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.05.008.

Forsberg, C., Thornberg, R., & Samuelsson, M. (2014). Bystanders to bullying: Fourth-to seventh-grade students' perspectives on their reactions. *Research Papers in Education, 29*, 557–576. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.878375.

Forsberg, C., Wood, L., Smith, J., Varjas, K., Meyers, J., Jungert, T., et al. (2016). Students' views of factors affecting their bystander behaviors in response to school bullying: A cross-collaborative conceptual qualitative analysis. *Research Papers in Education, 33*, 127–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2016.1271001.

Garandeau, C. F., Lee, I. A., & Salmivalli, C. (2014). Inequality matters: Classroom status hierarchy and adolescents' bullying. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 43*, 1123–1133. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-013-0040-4.

Gay, M. (1992). Talking with adolescents. *British Journal of Hospital Medicine, 42*, 207–218.

Gini, G., & Pozzoli, T. (2009). Association between bullying and psychosomatic problems: A meta-analysis. *Pediatrics, 123*, 1059–1065. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2008-12.

Gini, G., Pozzoli, T., & Bussey, K. (2014). The role of individual and collective moral disengagement in peer aggression and bystanding: A multilevel analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 43*, 441–452.

Glaser, B. G. (2005). *The grounded theory perspective III: Theoretical coding.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Graham, S., Bellmore, A., & Juvonen, J. (2003). Peer victimization in middle school: When self-and peer views diverge. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 19*(2), 117–137. https://doi.org/10.1300/J008v19n02_0.

Haltigan, J., & Vaillancourt, T. (2017). The influence of static and dynamic intrapersonal factors on longitudinal patterns of peer victimization through mid-adolescence: A latent transition analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 46*(1), 11–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-017-0342-1.

Hamarus, P., & Kaikkonen, P. (2008). School bullying as a creator of pupil peer pressure. *Educational Research, 50*, 333–345. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131880802499779.

Hellström, L., Persson, L., & Hagquist, C. (2015). Understanding and defining bullying–adolescents' own views. *Archives of Public Health, 73*, 4. https://doi.org/10.1186/2049-3258-73-4.

Horton, P. (2011). School bullying and social and moral orders. *Children & Society, 25*(4), 268–277.

Horton, P. (2016). Unpacking the bullying doll: Reflections from a fieldwork at the social-ecological square. *Confero, 4*(1), 71–95.

Jones, S. E., Manstead, A. S., & Livingstone, A. G. (2011). Ganging up or sticking together? Group processes and children's responses to text-message bullying. *British Journal of Psychology, 102*, 71–96. https://doi.org/10.1348/000712610X502826.

Lesko, N. (1988). *Symbolizing society: Stories, rites and structure in a catholic high school.* New York: Falmer Press.

Lupton, D. (2013). *Fat.* London: Routledge.

Mandell, L. (1991). The least-adult role in studying children. In F. C. Waksler (Ed.). *Studying the social worlds of children: Sociological readings* (pp. 38–59). London: Falmer Press.

Matthews, H. (2001). Power games and moral territories: Ethical dilemmas when working with children and young people. *Ethics, Place & Environment, 4*, 117–178.

Mazzone, A., Camodeca, M., & Salmivalli, C. (2016). Interactive effects of guilt and moral disengagement on bullying, defending and outsider behavior. *Journal of Moral Education, 45*, 419–432. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2016.1216399.

Mazzone, A., Thornberg, R., Stefanelli, S., Cadei, L., & Caravita, S. C. (2018). "Judging by the cover": A grounded theory study of bullying towards same-country and immigrant peers. *Children and Youth Services Review, 91*, 403–412.

Modecki, K. L., Minchin, J., Harbaugh, A. G., Guerra, N. G., & Runions, K. C. (2014). Bullying prevalence across contexts: A meta-analysis measuring cyber and traditional bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 55*, 602–611. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.06.007.

Ojala, K., & Nesdale, D. (2004). Bullying and social identity: The effects of group norms and distinctiveness threat on attitudes towards bullying. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 22*, 19–35. https://doi.org/10.1348/026151004772901096.

Olweus, D. (2002). *Bullying at school.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Patton, D. U., Hong, J. S., Patel, S., & Kral, M. J. (2017). A systematic review of research strategies used in qualitative studies on school bullying and victimization. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 18*(1), 3–16.

Rivers, I., Poteat, V. P., Noret, N., & Ashurst, N. (2009). Observing bullying at school: The mental health implications of witness status. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24*, 211. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018164i.

Rodham, K., Brewer, H., Mistral, W., & Stallard, P. (2006). Adolescents' perception of risk and challenge: A qualitative study. *Journal of Adolescence, 29*, 261–272. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.05.012.

Rodkin, P. C., & Hodges, E. V. (2003). Bullies and victims in the peer ecology: Four questions for psychologists and school professionals. *School Psychology Review,*

32(3), 384–400.
Salmivalli, C. (2010). Bullying and the peer group: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 15*, 112–120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.00.
Salmivalli, C. (2014). Participants Roles in Bullying: How can peer bystanders be utilized in interventions? *Theory into Practice, 54*(4), 286–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947222.
Salmivalli, C. (2018). Peer victimization and adjustment in young adulthood: Commentary on the special section. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 46*, 67–72 doi:0.1007/s10802-017-0372-8.
Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Smith, P. K., & Sharp, S. (1995). The problem of school bullying. In P. K. Smith, & S. Sharp (Eds.). *School bullying: Insights and perspectives* (pp. 1–19). London: Routledge.
Søndergaard, D. M. (2012). Bullying and social exclusion anxiety in schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 33*, 355–372. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.662824.
Song, J., & Oh, I. (2017). Investigation of the bystander effect in school bullying: Comparison of experiential, psychological and situational factors. *School Psychology International, 38*, 319–336. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034317699997.
Swearer, S. M., & Doll, B. (2001). Bullying in schools: An ecological framework. *Journal of Emotional Abuse, 2*, 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1300/J135v02n02_02.
Teräsahjo, T., & Salmivalli, C. (2003). “She is not actually bullied”: The discourse of harassment in student groups. *Aggressive Behavior, 29*, 134–154. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.10045.
Thornberg, R. (2007). A classmate in distress: Schoolchildren as bystanders and their reasons for how they act. *Social Psychology of Education, 10*, 5–28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-006-9009-4.
Thornberg, R. (2010a). A study of children's conceptions of school rules by investigating their judgments of transgressions in the absence of rules. *Educational Psychology, 30*, 583–603 doi: 0.1080/01443410.2010.492348.
Thornberg, R. (2011). ‘She's weird!’ — the social construction of bullying in school: A review of qualitative research. *Children & Society, 25*, 258–267. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2011.00374.x.
Thornberg, R. (2015). School bullying as a collective action: Stigma processes and identity struggling. *Children & Society, 29*, 310–320. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12058.
Thornberg, R. (2017). School bullying and fitting into the peer landscape: A grounded theory field study. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 39*, 144–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1330680.
Thornberg, R., & Jungert, T. (2013). Bystander behavior in bullying situations: Basic moral sensitivity, moral disengagement and defender self-efficacy. *Journal of Adolescence, 36*, 475–483. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.02.003.
Thornberg, R., Landgren, L., & Wiman, E. (2018). *‘It depends’: A qualitative study on how adolescent students explain bystander intervention and non-intervention in bullying situations.* School Psychology Internationalhttps://doi.org/10.1177/0143034318779225 Advance online publication.
Thornberg, R., & Wänström, L. (2018). *Bullying and its association with altruism toward victims, blaming the victims, and classroom prevalence of bystander behaviors: A multilevel analysis.* Social Psychology of Educationhttps://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-018-9457-7 Advance online publication.
Tłuściak-Deliowska, A. (2018). Profilaktyka bullyingu–w stronę społeczno-emocjonalnego uczenia się i pozytywnej dynamiki grupy rówieśniczej. *Dziecko Krzywdzone. Teoria, Badania, Praktyka, 17*(1), 46–67.
Vaillancourt, T., McDougall, P., Hymel, S., Krygsman, A., Miller, J., Stiver, K., et al. (2008). Bullying: Are researchers and children/youth talking about the same thing? *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 32*, 486–495. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025408095553.
Viala, E. S. (2014). ‘Is something wrong with me?’: a context-sensitive analysis of school bullying. In R. M. Schott, & D. M. Søndergaard (Eds.). *School bullying: New theories in context* (pp. 361–386). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Wójcik, M., & Hełka, A. M. (2018). *Meeting the needs of young adolescents: ABBL anti-bullying program during middle school transition. Psychological reports*Advance online publicationhttps://doi.org/10.1177/0033294118768671.
Wójcik, M., Hełka, A., Kozak, B., Błońska, M., Garbaciuk, A., & Małczak, M. (2015). Zapobieganie wykluczeniu rówieśniczemu w gimnazjum. *Edukacja, 3*(134), 123–140.
Wójcik, M., Hełka, A., Kozak, B., Wośko, A., & Błońska, M. (2016). Postrzeganie przez nauczycieli problemu przemocy rówieśniczej i jej przeciwdziałania w środowisku szkolnym. *Czasopismo Psychologiczne-Pychological Journal, 22*(2), 323–332.
Wójcik, M., & Kozak, B. (2015). Bullying and exclusion from dominant peer group in Polish middle schools. *Polish Psychological Bulletin, 46*, 2–14. https://doi.org/10.1515/ppb-2015-0001.
Wójcik, M., & Mondry, M. (2017). *Student action research: Preventing bullying in secondary school—Inkla project.* Action Research Advance online publication. doi:1476750317730652.
Wood, L., Smith, J., Varjas, K., & Meyers, J. (2017). School personnel social support and nonsupport for bystanders of bullying: Exploring student perspectives. *Journal of School Psychology, 61*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2016.12.003.
Yun, H. Y., & Graham, S. (2018). Defending victims of bullying in early adolescence: A multilevel analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*, 1926–1937. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0869-7.
Zych, I., Ortega-Ruiz, R., & Del Rey, R. (2015). Scientific research on bullying and cyberbullying: Where have we been and where are we going. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 24*, 188–198.