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**School bullying in context: a health behaviour and health
psychology perspective**

Theses of PhD dissertation

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Introduction

The present doctoral dissertation is based on an international, country representative, cross-sectional study of schoolchildren (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children, HBSC) that investigates young people's health and health behaviour. More closely, we will focus on school bullying and other manifestations of peer violence. Bullying is a relationship problem, it means assertion of interpersonal power through aggression (Pepler & Craig, 2000). Important features of bullying are that it is deliberate, repeated and there is power imbalance between perpetrator and victim (Olweus, 1991). Bullying has different forms: physical, verbal, relational and there is also online type. This latter refers to the use of electronic communication to bully a person (e.g. another student) (Kowalski, Limber & Agatson, 2012; Zsila, Ujhegyi & Demetrovics, 2015; Zsila, Urbán, Griffiths & Demetrovics, 2018).

Studies on bullying reflect wide variations in prevalence across countries (Inchley et al., 2016). Prevalence can also differ by study focus, applied research methods and data sources. (Stassen Berger, 2007). National and international studies have already addressed a number of potentially controversial issues related to the definition, measurement and interpretation of bullying. In some cases these efforts resulted in successful solutions however, other aspects of bullying still require further considerations (Buda, 2016). Research design, expert dialogue and integrated approach to bullying is hindered by the fact that Hungarian language does not have a single word to express bullying.

Based on their involvement in bullying, most researchers traditionally distinguished between perpetrators, victims or bully-victims. However other studies suggested that bullying should be viewed as a continuum ranging between 'bully' and 'victim'. (Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle & Mickelson, 2001). A distinct form of peer violence is fighting, that is physical aggression between equally strong partners (Molcho, Harel & Lash, 2004). It may happen that categorization of students into distinct (cyber)bully and (cyber)victim clusters based on theoretical assumptions is not the best way as their involvement in peer violence follows rather specific patterns (Wang, Iannotti, Luk & Nansel, 2010a; Bradshaw, Waasdorp & O'Brennan, 2013).

Bullying has adverse outcomes on health and social adjustment in victims, bullies, bully-victims, and bystanders. Besides direct influences, long-term effects of bullying can span into later phases of adolescence and adulthood (Olweus, 2011) (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin és Patton, 2001).

The most well known theoretical framework for bullying, the socio-ecological framework has been developed by Espelage et al. (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). It is the extension of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model to bullying (Espelage és Swearer, 2004). From the socio-ecological perspective, bullying is a result of complex relationships among the individual (e.g. social skills, academic achievement, appearance), family (e.g. monitoring, overprotection), school (e.g. structure and supervision, school climate), peers (e.g. peer norms), and broader social factors (e.g. antibullying policy in schools, social inequalities) (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Within the particular context, there are further theories to explain peer violence (e.g. theories of social capital, social dominance, organisational culture or even deficits of mentalisation) (Evans & Smokowski, 2015; Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2004). Nevertheless, the socio-ecological model serves as a theoretical framework for this dissertation as well.

Based on socio-ecological approach there are numerous individual and social factors resulting victimisation or perpetration. On individual level, psychosomatic symptoms, lower level of life satisfaction and substance use may be indicators of adjustment problems of those involved in bullying (Gobina, Zaborskis, Pudule, Kalnins & Villerusa, 2008; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Vieno, Gini & Santinello, 2011). Besides these factors, the associations of bullying with physical appearance, body image, self esteem, self rated health, mental health problems (e.g. anxiety and depression) and media use are widely discussed (Janssen, Craig, Boyce & Pickett, 2004; Gendron, Williams & Guerra, 2011; Kuntsche, Pickett, Overpeck, Craig, Boyce & de Matos, 2006). Regarding peer related factors, several studies found positive association between intensity (or quality) of peer relations, electronic media communication, intensity of face-to-face interactions with friends and certain risk behaviours such as bullying. (Gommans et al., 2015; Jaccard, Blanton & Dodge, 2005). School victimisation is related to poor social skills and loneliness. Bullies may attack children that are easy targets as they don't have friends or supportive peer relations (Brighi, Guarini, Melotti, Galli, & Genta, 2012; Acquah, Topalli, Wilson, Juntilla & Niemi, 2015). Associations between school climate, school perception and bullying are also widely documented (Laufer & Harel, 2003). Several research identified relationship with parental disciplinary style and family climate indicating that those involved in bullying may come from adverse emotional environments (Nation, Vieno, Perkins & Santinello, 2008; Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos & Chatzilambou, 2013).

Main research questions of the dissertation

Based on the issues raised above, one of our main goal was to investigate the conceptualisation of bullying among young people (Research question 1. and 2.). Another purpose was to explore time trends in bullying in Hungary (Research question 3). We also aimed to identify patterns of peer violence among Hungarian adolescents and most important factors associated with identified patterns (Research questions 4).

1. Methodological issues around bullying definition, measurement and interpretation may be addressed by asking adolescent people directly about their conceptualisation of bullying. To discover this – due to nature of the issue – qualitative research method was applied.
2. Regarding the interpretation, we are taking an international perspective and we made qualitative focus groups to investigate the understanding of bullying across four non-English speaking countries with differing prevalence, all of which lack a single word for bullying. We aimed a better understanding of how young people define bullying and complete HBSC quantitative data on bullying with qualitative data. The participating countries were Belgium (French), Hungary, Israel and Romania. This question is especially relevant because the foundation for international comparison is the shared concern of the phenomenon under the scope of interest.
3. Prior studies of bullying contributed to the national research but mostly covered only one data collection. However in the HBSC study we had the opportunity to investigate bullying time trends based on five country representative data collections (in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018). Our main research question was whether there were significant changes in the past 15-20 years in the extension of bullying and whether there are important age and gender differences observable.
4. Finally, it was hypothesised, that involvement in peer violence does not constitute or replicate clear theoretical clusters (such as bully, victim, cyberbully, cybervictim, fighter) but there are particular co-occurrences of forms of violence and students can be classified along specific patterns. To test this hypothesis a latent class analysis was applied. Our

further aim was to investigate individual, family-, peer- and school related factors that could be associated with identified latent class memberships and whether there are some important differences between children involved in any form of violence versus children not being involved in violence at all. To do so, widely documented variables were used for further analysis.

First research: Investigation of bullying conceptualization with qualitative method as a supplementary study for the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Survey¹

Method

The participants of the qualitative focus group study were 60 boys and 69 girls (totally 129 students) from grades 5th, 7th, 9th (ages 10-17). Convenience sampling was applied and the data was collected in schools during school hours. Regarding measurement, semi-structured interviews guided by international protocol (developed by Violence and Injury Prevention Focus Group of HBSC) were led with several groups of students. The data collection was carried out in the 2015/2016 academic year. The qualitative data was elaborated by the method of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Summary of results

Based on the results of focus group interviews, we can conclude that Hungarian adolescents have sophisticated concept about characteristics of bullying, perpetrators and victims. Theoretically, they clearly understand power imbalance as a key criteria of bullying. As opposed to fighting, adolescents consider bullying as pre-planned and timely stable actions that cause substantial harm to the victim. Hungarian adolescents make some important remarks about the differences between bullying and fighting however, this differentiation is not consistently stable over certain situations. Regarding the frequency of bullying, according to some student, not repeatedness but severity characterises bullying better. Young people discussed the role of several family related factors in the background of bullying but they hardly mentioned thoughts about the contribution of schools, teachers or peers. Interestingly cyberbullying was poorly reflected students almost exclusively concentrated on platforms (email, skype, facebook, phone) of cyberbullying. As reasons for bullying many factors were discussed with little or no emphasis on peer group dynamics (Zsila et al, 2018).

Second study: Bullying interpretation in an international context – comparison of qualitative data in four non- English speaking countries²

Methods

Apart from Hungarian data collection, three other countries participated the qualitative survey: Romania, Israel, and French Belgium. In Belgium totally 102, in Israel 99 and in

¹Detailed description of the study: Várnai, D., Jármí, É., Arnold, P., Demetrovics, Zs., Németh, Á., Kökönyei, Gy. és Örkényi, Á. (2018). A kortársbántalmazás (bullying) értelmezésének vizsgálata kvalitatív módszerrel – „Az iskoláskorú gyermekek egészségmagatartása” (HBSC) vizsgálat módszertanának kiegészítésére. *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, 73(4), 519–539.

² A paper presenting the results of this study is in progress.

Romania 72 student from grades 5th, 7th, 9th (ages 10-17) participated the focus groups. In all participating countries convenience sampling was applied with an aim to cover mixed SES and urban/suburban/ country areas. National research groups recruited schools on a voluntary basis. Bullying validation protocol developed by Violence and Injury Prevention Focus Group of the HBSC International Team. The semi-structured interviews in the forms of group discussion were guided by several open-ended questions. The data collection was carried out in the 2015/2016 academic year in all participating countries. The analysis of the qualitative data the method of thematic analysis was chosen (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After this experts from the participating countries discussed the common themes and country specific themes.

Results

Most of the themes mentioned by students were common in all participating countries with some country specific topics. All groups in the participating countries mentioned the following themes: (1) main characteristics and reasons for bullying, (2) main characteristics of the bully, (3) characteristics of victim, (4) consequences of bullying, (5) main characteristics of cyberbullying, (6) age related changes in bullying, (7) differentiation of bullying and other forms of violence. Based on our qualitative data, we can conclude that students in the participating countries have similar concerns of bullying and similar insecurities in evaluating real life bullying situations.. So prevalences may differ based on real life differences and not predominantly because of cultural and language differences. However these small differences may reflect slight shifts in sensitivity and awareness or insecurities around bullying conceptualisation.

Third study: Epidemiology data and time trends describing the extension of bullying– in the light of Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Study

Method

The Hungarian data collections were carried out according to the guidelines of the actual International Protocol of HBSC (Currie et al., 2012; Németh & Költő, 2016). The survey is representative on national level and the representativity is ensured by multistage layered sampling method (Currie et al., 2014). The target group of the study are school aged boys and girls from grades 5th, 7th, 9th and 11th (ages 11-18). In our analysis data from the 1993/1994., the 1997/1998, the 2001/2002, the 2005/2006, the 2009/2010, the 2013/2014 and the 2017/2018 data collections were included. In the study questionnaire items on health behaviour, subjective health and contextual variables (demography, family-, peer- and school related variables) are included. Bullying was measured applying the so called definition method. From the 2013/2014 data collection cyberbullying has also been assessed. In the followings the bullying prevalence data (also by age and gender) will be presented based on five data collections of the HBSC study.

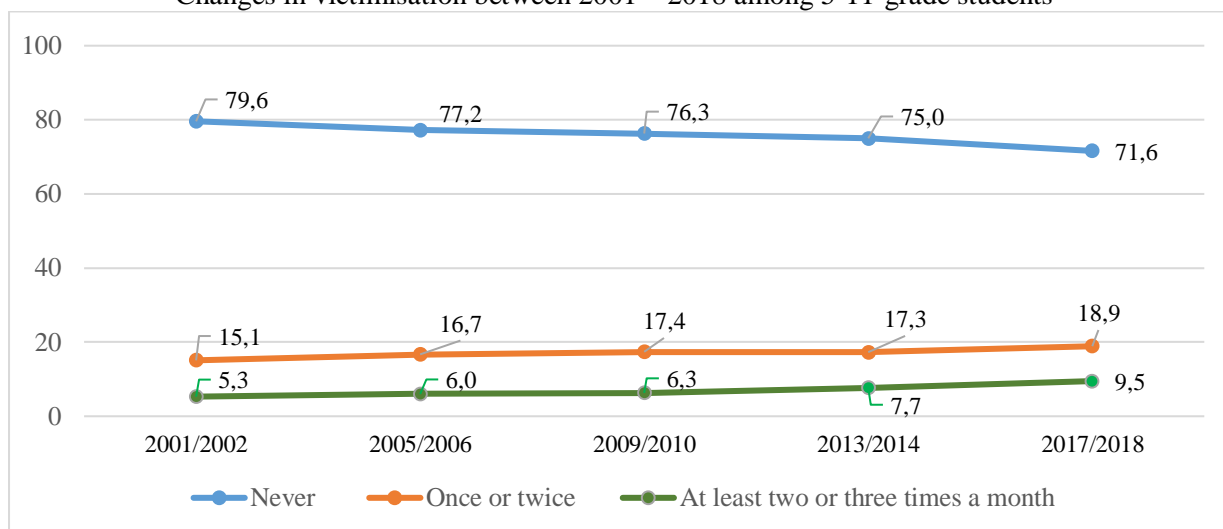
Summary of results

Being bullied

Considering all frequency categories, slight increase of prevalences are observed between 2001 and 2018. With other words, rate of students not being bullied at all has significantly decreased (Figure 1.). Taking age and gender differences into account most of the prevalence changes happened among 5th grader students. Gender differences in victimisation are

not clear however, significant age differences were present at all data collections. From that we can infer, that bullying decreases with age – at least according to quantitative data.

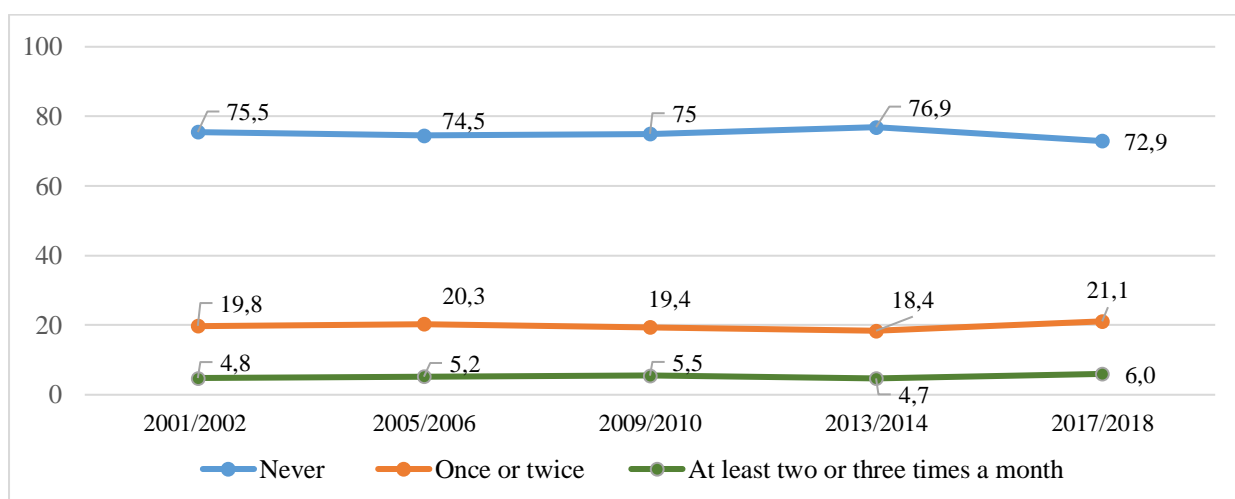
Figure 1.
Changes in victimisation between 2001—2018 among 5-11-grade students



Bullying others

In sum, regarding bullying others there is not necessarily linear, slight but significant increase in prevalences between 2001-2018 in given categories of frequency (*Figure 2.*). The most prevalent changes happened between 2013 and 2017. In perpetration significant and marked gender differences are present: boys more likely bully others than girls do. Age differences are also observable: perpetration is more frequent at younger ages.

Figure 2.
Changes in bullying others between 2001—2018 among 5-11-grade students



Fourth study: Empirically based classification of peer violence: a latent class analysis and its associations with individual, peer, family and school variables³

Methods

Considering the fact that peer violence involvement does not equal to bullying involvement, we applied a classification method, namely latent class analysis to explore the patterns of peer violence. In the first model data of the 2013/2014 data collection was included with the final sample size was of 6153. For the purposes of latent class analysis, items on school bullying, two forms of cybervictimisation and fighting were dichotomised. In the next step after the LCA, a multinomial logistic regression analysis was carried out to investigate factors associated with identified latent class membership. In the multinomial regression model the following independent variables were entered: age and gender, life satisfaction, drunkenness lifetime prevalence, psychosomatic symptom scale, intensity of online communication with close friends, intensity of face-to-face communication with friends, number of close male and female friends, perceived family and peer support, liking school and perceived school pressure.

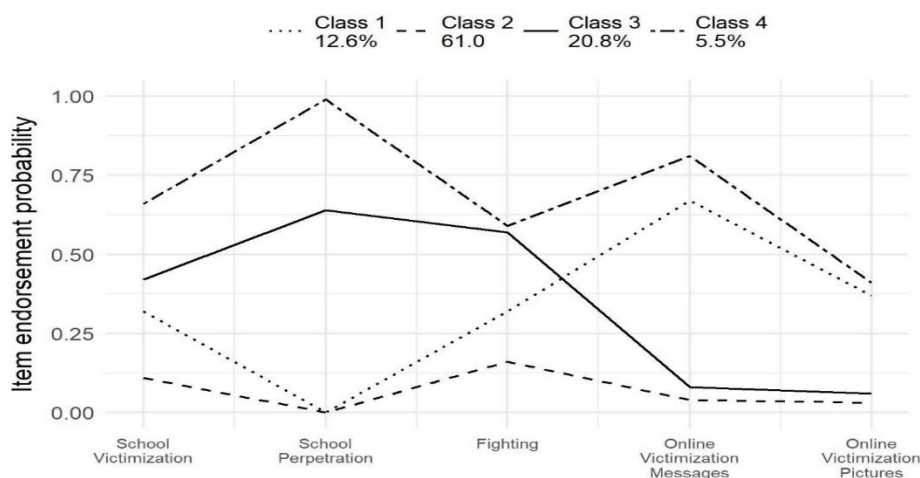
In the second LCA model the data from the 2017/2018 data collection were used with the final sample size of 6004. This time, items on school bullying, cyberbullying and fighting were dichotomised for the purposes of the latent class analysis.. In the multinomial regression model the following independent variables were entered: age and gender, life satisfaction, drunkenness lifetime prevalence, psychosomatic symptom scale, intensity of online communication with close friends, online preference scale, perceived family and peer support, liking school and perceived school pressure.

Summary of results

In case of the first model, a 4-class-model presented the best fit indices so this model was selected for further analysis and discussion. The first latent class “*predominantly online victims*” covered 12.6% of students; the 2. latent class „*not directly involved in peer violence*” comprised 61% of the sample; whereas the third latent class „*primarily involved in school bullying and fighting*” were present with 20,8%. About 5,5% of students belonged to the fourth class: “*highly involved in school and cybrbullying and fighting*” (Figure 3.).

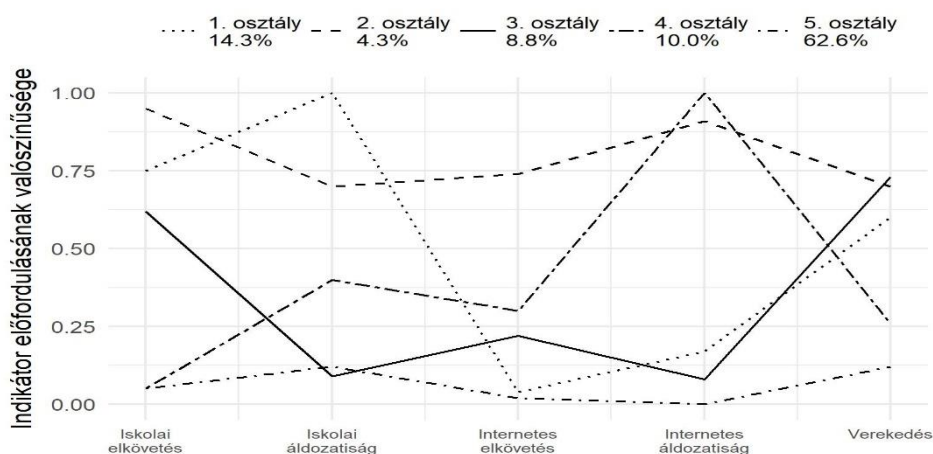
³ Based manuscript submitted to International Journal of Mental Health and Addictions: Várnai, D. Horváth, Zs. Jármí, É., Urbán, R., Demetrovics, Zs., Németh, Á., Kökönyei, Gy. Empirically based classification of peer violence in a nationally representative sample of adolescents: a latent class analysis

Figure 3.
Latent classes of school and cyberbullying and fighting HBSC 2013/2014



In case of the second model, a 5-class-model presented the best fit indices so this model was selected for further analysis and discussion. The first latent class “*primarily involved in school bullying and fighting*” covered 14.3% of students; the second latent class „*highly involved in school and cybrbullying and fighting*” comprised 4.3% of the sample; the third latent class „*primarily school aggressor*” were present with 8.8%. About 10% of students belonged to the fourth class: “*predominantly online victims*” and we also found the group of “*not directly involved in peer violence*” (62.6% of the sample) (Figure 4.).

Figure 4.
Latent classes of school and cyberbullying and fighting HBSC 2013/2014
. HBSC 2017/2018



Both LCA identified groups of „*not directly involved in peer violence*”, „*highly involved in school and cybrbullying and fighting*”, „*primarily involved in school bullying and fighting*” and “*predominantly online victims*”. Identification of these four groups are considered to be a stable result along different data collections. The analysis of the 2017 data resulted only one additional category, namely group of „*primarily school aggressor*”. In latent class analysis conventional theoretical categories of bullying was not replicated, however the identified latent

classes more accurately describe the overlaps of offline and online bullying, between victimisation and perpetration, and physical bullying and fighting (Williford, Brisson, Bender, Jenson & Forrest-Bank, 2011; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2015).

Considering the multinomial regression models, the higher probability for boys to be involved in latent groups that is characterised by bullying perpetration and fighting is a stable result. In both models the group membership in group „*highly involved in school and cybrbullying and fighting*” was associated with lower perceived family and peer support, preference for or higher intensity of online contact with friends, drunkenness lifetime prevalence and more psychosomatic symptoms. It was observed in both samples that cyberbullying involvement was predicted by more intensive online communication, so cyberbullying is associated with contacting friends online. Psychosomatic symptoms are associated with all violence involvement groups. In the drunkenness lifetime prevalence a consistent pattern is observable: drunkenness at least once is more likely associated with groups where bullying perpetration and fighting is present but it is not associated with groups where victimisation is more dominant (or where perpetration is of low probability). In both models perceived family support was associated with all bullying involvement groups: higher perceived support decreased the odds for peer violence involvement.

Summary

In my doctoral dissertation different aspects of bullying and peer violence in Hungarian adolescents were presented. Based on the national qualitative focus group study we can conclude that Hungarian schoolchildren have sophisticated concepts of bullying and are capable to adequately interpret questions measuring bullying however, they have particular insecurities when evaluating given bullying situations. On one hand it is advisable to strive for higher fit of bullying questions to student's age and bullying concepts (e.g. with regards to severity). Nevertheless, it is also important to increase young people's explicit knowledge about bullying and raise their awareness about the issue. It is worth to note, that students consider family factors more important than peer dynamics or school factors in the occurrence of bullying. Based on the international validation study the role of family in the background of bullying behaviour was not only mentioned by Hungarian students it was also expressed by young people in Romania, Israel and French Belgium, Antibullying programs should educate children about different parties' options for prevention and intervention

Regarding time trends in the light of five cross – sectional, country representative surveys between 2001 and 2018, a slight but significant increase of school bullying was found... As it was mentioned it may be resulted by expansion of bullying but also by increased awareness of the society. It is important to monitor trends and keep track of individual, family, peer, school and social factors behind the rise of bullying.

In the last section we identified the patterns of peer violence in two representative survey by using latent class analysis. The clusters that we have found are not identical to conventional theoretical groups of „bullies”, „victims” or „bully-victims”, as children - to different extents - can be involved in multiple violence forms. Finally from associated factors we would like to highlight more frequent psychosomatic symptoms and lower perceived social support as these variables are associated with all groups being involved in any form of peer violence.

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