

## Bullying/victimization from a family perspective: a qualitative study of secondary school students' views

I. Bibou-Nakou · J. Tsiantis · H. Assimopoulos ·  
P. Chatzilambou

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**Abstract** The present paper uses a qualitative method in order to study the ways in which bullying is discursively organized among young adolescent students in relation to the family factors related to it. Only a few studies have linked aspects of parenting and family functioning to bullying through the use of students' discourses despite the fact that family views and policies have a significant impact on bullying and the role the adolescent takes in relation to it, as well as the phenomenon. In the present study, 5 schools with a total number of 90 students in 14 focus groups participated through semistructured interviews. The analysis was facilitated by QSR NVivo, and three themes emerged under the heading of family-related factors of bullying: (a) difficult home environment with many conflicts between the spouses or between the parents and the young adolescents, (b) parenting styles such as parental overprotection, lack of supervision, or excessive control, and (c) domestic abuse. The findings of this study confirm patterns of bullying and its relation to familial factors in the international literature. The implications of the findings are discussed in light of intervention, as well as prevention.

**Keywords** Early adolescence · Bullying · Familial factors · Qualitative study

### Introduction

In the last two decades, bullying has been extensively researched with a plethora of studies investigating this particular aspect of child victimization (Ahmed and Braithwaite 2004;

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I. Bibou-Nakou (✉)  
Clinical and School Psychology, Faculty of Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki,  
Aristotelous 29, 54631 Thessaloniki, Greece  
e-mail: bibou@eled.auth.gr

J. Tsiantis  
Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children and Adolescents, Athens, Greece

H. Assimopoulos  
Department of Social Work, Technological Educational Institution, Athens, Greece

P. Chatzilambou  
Clinical Psychologist, Psychotherapist, Private Practice, Thessaloniki, Greece

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Olweus 1993, 1995; O'Moore and Kirkham 2001; O'Moore and Minton 2004; Rigby 1996). Many books and articles deal with the phenomenon of bullying in order to raise awareness among the parties involved, including professionals (Arseneault et al. 2010; Jimerson et al. 2010; Smith and Sharp 1994). Since much of the bullying and victimization are reported either by children or young people as taking place at school, it follows that students and teachers are the main informers/participants, as well as recipients of research studies on the phenomenon. However, by limiting research to schools could mean that the potential effects of other environments within the broader community context, such as the family, are overlooked. The crucial role that the family plays on the child's socialization process has been well documented (Ungar 2004; Weiss et al. 1992; Yeung and Leadbeater 2010), particularly in terms of how children develop social competence (Swearer et al. 2009). The present paper focuses on the ways in which family functioning acts as either a stressful or a protective factor in relation to bullying as perceived by adolescent students.

Even though there is extensive research that examines the family context and its association with aggressive behavior in general,<sup>1</sup> it appears that insufficient attention has been paid to family factors as etiological elements in the discourse on student bullying (Baldry and Farrington 2005; Chan 2006; You et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, there are some excellent studies showing the family situation as one of the best predictors of bullying and victimization among students (Cassidy 2009; Olweus 1980; Rigby 1993, 1996). Bullying is related, among other factors, to maternal depression (Bibou-Nakou 2003), low parent-child involvement (Flouri and Buchanan 2003), and negative emotions on behalf of the parents (Berdondini and Smith 1996; Bowers et al. 1992; Connolly and O'Moore 2003).<sup>2</sup>

The present study forms part of a greater program funded by the EU,<sup>3</sup> which aims to assess needs in regards to bullying in schools, to sensitize and train teachers, parents, and pupils to recognize and effectively manage violent situations in the school setting, and to raise community awareness on the issue (Bibou-Nakou 2007a). In the present paper, an examination is carried out of the ways secondary school students, aged 13–15 years, interpret bullying as a family-related factor through a qualitative approach.

During adolescence, the parental role in the individuation and the ongoing identity formation of adolescents is vital and should be positive. Adolescence is a period for parents to enhance the individuation process of their teenage offspring by providing them with continual support (Barber 2005; Ungar 2004; Younnis and Smollar 1985). Hence, what adolescents experience in the family situation and what they learn from their parents is a critically important area of research.

Some studies, mainly quantitative that have focused on family factors and their relation to bullying (Malti et al. 2009; Stevens et al. 2002), measure children's attributions or perceptions of family functioning through the use of questionnaires (Graham and Juvonen 2001;

<sup>1</sup> Thus, among family factors that have been found to relate to childhood aggression and delinquent behavior—and not specifically bullying—are poor parental supervision, harsh parental discipline, low parental involvement with the child, and marital discord (Baldry and Farrington 2005; Connell et al. 2011; Valles and Knutson 2008).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted here that much more is known about families of children who bully others than of children characterized as victims and even less about the family characteristics of bully-victims (Swearer et al. 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Daphne Programme: "Needs assessment and awareness raising programme for bullying in schools. Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children & Adolescents (APHCA). Scientific director: J. Tsiantis, Project No. JLS/DAP/2005-1/040/YG. Coordinating country: Greece-APHCA (Assimopoulos, E., Giannakopoulou, D., Hatzipemos, T., Konida, E., Soumaki, E.). Participant countries: Cyprus (Paradisiotou, A. & Tziogouros, C.), Germany (Witteriede, H., University of Lueneburg), & Lithuania (Bulotaite, L. & Povilaitis, R., Department of General Psychology, Vilnius University).

Minton and O'Moore 2004; Swart and Bredekamp 2009; Terasahjo and Salmivalli 2003). Eslea and Smith (2000), for example, investigating students and parents' attitudes towards bullying, found that there was little association between parental attitudes and those of their children. A more recent study (Curtner-Smith et al. 2006) found that children whose mothers had high empathy and fostered child independence engaged in bullying much less frequently.

The present study adopts a qualitative approach and focuses on young adolescent students' views on bullying. Only a few qualitative studies have been conducted in relation to children's and adolescents' general views on bullying (Athanasopoulos and Deliyanni-Kouimtzi 2010; Devine and Kelly 2006; James and Owens 2005; Owens et al. 2000; Swart and Bredekamp 2009; Terasahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Yubero and Navarro 2006), despite the fact that there is evidence to suggest that qualitative research methodology can provide in-depth, valid, and reliable information into the dynamics of bullying behavior (Lam and Liu 2007; Mishna et al. 2008). More specifically, the use of a qualitative approach allows one to look into the dynamics of the process, the reasons the adolescents give for the bullying situation, as well as the feelings of adolescents involved in the bullying relationship.<sup>4</sup> Through the application of qualitative methods, young people are encouraged to speak for themselves and are given a voice. We, thus, gain a better understanding of their experiences and the ways these are affecting them. Thornberg (2010), in a very interesting and original study, adopted the qualitative method using individual interviews with 56 school children in order to investigate their representations on the causes of bullying. Among the diverse social representations that the children used in their talk in their attempts to explain bullying experiences and practices, the representation of "bullying as the work of a disturbed bully" (Thornberg 2010: 316) was connected with family problems, hence supporting the view that family conflicts and neglectful parenting contribute to bullying behavior.

To sum up, the present paper is concerned with the ways in which the issue of bullying is discursively organized among adolescent students in relation to family factors. It is expected that this type of research will provide data that shed light on not only the treatment needs of youth who experience bullying but also prevention tactics that curb this phenomenon in the school community.

#### Review of the main theoretical models explaining family factors and school bullying

There has been extensive research on the link between parenting, parental behavior, and problematic childhood behavior (Haggerty et al. 1996; Underwood et al. 2009). Patterson (1986, 1990), more than two decades ago, claimed that families with strong hierarchical power structures that lack familial cohesion and monitoring predispose a child to aggressive behavior. Although there are many theories on how parents may influence the use of aggressive strategies in their children (Christie-Mizell 2003), it is beyond the scope of this paper to present them in full detail.

The decade of the 1980s marked a change in research emphasis on the conception of resilience that shifted the focus from psychopathology to prevention and intervention. Barber (2005), for example, described three family aspects of socialization that are necessary for the healthy development of children: a sense of connection or connectedness, also referred to as warmth, with significant others; parental regulation of behavior, such as supervision and monitoring; and a process of facilitation of psychological autonomy that is necessary during adolescence as a period of identity formation. Studies that have researched *direct influences* of

<sup>4</sup> See Terasahjo and Salmivalli's (2003) argumentation on the benefits of using qualitative studies in bullying.

family functioning (Espelage and Swearer 2010) and relations on bullying used mainly the parenting styles of Baumrind and looked into the issue of parental supervision. These studies associate the lack of supervision and the use of power-asserting methods of discipline with aggression and bullying (Farrington 1994; Jimenez et al. 2010). The *indirect influences* of family relations on bullying have adopted a broader view of the family environment. Apart from the contribution of social learning and social cognitive theories, there are diverse theoretical conceptualizations of the parent-child relationship associated to bullying that are recognized in the following main models: (a) attachment that serves as an internal working model for later relationships, (b) social support, (c) family systems, and (d) parental disciplinary style. Emotion presumably "provides the thread and the color in the tapestry of family life" (Byng-Hall 1987: 79) and plays a crucial role in all the models mentioned above.

- (a) A growing body of research conceived bullying and negative behavior towards peers as resulting from a failure to bond with a parental figure (Mishieles et al. 2008; Troy and Sroufe 1987). Insecure or ambivalent *bonding*, for instance, may lead to misattributions of the intentions of others, lack of empathy towards the peer group (Dautenhahn and Woods 2003), or the development of relationally aggressive strategies (Mishieles et al. 2008).
- (b) The relationship between *parental support* and children's social adjustment has been well documented (Nickerson et al. 2009; Rigby 1994).<sup>5</sup> Parental social support has been researched as a protective factor related to involvement in bullying behavior (Cassidy 2009; Connors-Burrow et al. 2009; Kionishi and Hymel 2009; McGrath et al. 2009), with an emphasis given on the family structure and its relation to bullying (Flouri and Buchanan 2003).
- (c) From the *family systems approach* (e.g., see Rigby 1994), the concepts of cohesion and enmeshment have mostly been investigated, whereas less research has been conducted on more complex patterns of systemic interaction and communication (Idsoe et al. 2008; Olson et al. 1979; Olweus 1991) or the family structure itself. Bowers et al. (1992, 1994), for instance, in a series of studies, demonstrated that the dimensions of power and cohesion are extremely useful in distinguishing between bullies, victims, and bullies-victims (1992) and that victims reported to be in more "enmeshed" families, whereas bullies perceived their families as "disengaged" (1994). Added to this, Rigby (1994) found that perceived negative affect (such as perceived lack of emotional support and understanding) and inadequate communication patterns (such as lack of positive effective communication) were significantly associated with the tendency to engage in bullying behavior for a sample of 856 students aged 13–16 years old. These findings were replicated 2 years later (Berdondini and Smith 1996) in an Italian sample where bullies reported lower cohesion to and between parents in comparison to the control group. In the same study, the victims reported more enmeshed family functioning in relation to both bullies and control students.
- (d) There is an extensive body of research that associates both the authoritarian and the permissive *style of parenting* with aggressive behavior and bullying experiences and practices (Baumrind 1980; Olweus 1980). Children involved in bullying practices report that (a) their parents use an authoritarian style (Manning et al. 1978; Olweus 1995), (b) their families lack warmth and structure, (Olweus 1993; Stevens et al. 2002), and (c) the children encounter significant difficulties in negotiating cooperative relationships within the family (Nation et al. 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The content of social support, in general, includes emotional support, such as feelings of trust; appraisal support, such as positive feedback from the parents to the child; and instrumental support, such as helping a child in a practical way, funding him/her, etc.

### Theoretical background and context of the present study

The present study, as already mentioned, was conducted as part of a larger-scale European research project and uses a qualitative research design in order to understand young adolescents' interpretations of bullying, with a focus on family factors. It is informed by the new social studies of childhood, which emphasize children and adolescents as social agents participating actively in the negotiation and construction of their social reality (Mayall 2002; Prout 2005; Qvortrup 2005). Our research is also prompted by recent developments in social policy, including a focus on children's rights and the need to consult young people about issues of concern to them, and the principles embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Oliver and Candappa 2003). Moreover, the present study on bullying is in line with the discursive, rhetorical, and social constructionist approaches in social psychology (e.g., Billig 1987; Burman and Parker 1993; Potter and Wetherell 1987).

It should be stressed that Greek research on the bullying problem is still at an early, descriptive stage, trying to map out the prevalence and the incidence of the problem within the school context. Greek teachers and students are mainly involved in research studies that adopt a quantitative approach in order to delineate the bullying problem in the specific context. A number of empirical studies that have been carried out over the last two decades in Greece (Andreou et al. 2005; Deliyanni 2005; Sapouna 2008) estimate that about 10% of the students in Greece are subjected to peer victimization.

At another level, the Greek family has experienced several transformations in the past 50 years (Georgas 2000; Katakis 1998). In relation to their parenting practices, Greek families have been found to hold more conservative and traditional views on family life that reinforce family solidarity, mutually responsive relationships, and reciprocal support. In addition, evidence shows that the Greek family has been transformed from an extended family structure to the nuclear family structure (Georgas 2000; Katakis 1998).

### Method

#### Participants and research site

Five high schools (two schools in a disadvantaged area in the west of the city, two schools in the center, and one in the eastern area of the city) participated in the study<sup>6</sup> that involved semistructured interviews with 90 pupils in 14 focus groups. It needs to be stressed that no local or national school policies have been developed in relation to antibullying interventions in Greece and, of course, this applies to the participating schools as well. Each focus group was comprised of five to eight participants (Krueger 1988), aged 13–15. The groups were self-selected, since talking in groups, especially groups of friends, is less intimidating and may feel more "natural" than individual interviews (Frosh et al. 2001). The fieldwork was completed during the winter and spring terms of 2006–2007.<sup>7</sup> As a means of obtaining young adolescents' consent to take part in the research, we visited their classrooms and talked to them about the goal of the study. Model parental consent letters were also given to the schools.

<sup>6</sup> The schools were randomly selected from around Thessaloniki, the second biggest city in Greece (see Bibou-Nakou 2007a, b).

<sup>7</sup> The number of groups is justified by the saturation point of the information.

## Focus group interviews

As previously mentioned, the students were invited to participate willingly in focus group discussions held in their schools. In the vast majority of groups, equal gender representation was achieved. As a methodological approach, focus groups appear to be valuable to the study of argumentation for or against a thesis, as well as for the identification of common interpretative resources and rhetorical correlations (Billig 1987).<sup>8</sup> Prior to each group interview, all participants were assured of total confidentiality and their right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time. During the group interviews, the researcher used a set of semistructured questions that covered issues such as (a) the ways adolescents develop their social relationships at school, (b) how they make friends, and (c) issues of disputes and conflict in peer relations.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen from the interview schedule (for the interview guide, see the Appendix), the issue of bullying was not focused on, since we did not want our interpretation of the situation to be imposed on the participants; instead, we expected them to talk about bullying as part of their everyday peer culture at school. Thus, in respect of the extent of bullying stories, in 8 out of the 14 groups, one or more incidents of bullying were recounted, often in considerable detail, concerning either the speakers or their peers. During the scheduled interviews, when the issue of bullying arose, it was discussed thoroughly in order to make sure that it concerned repeated, intended incidents of bullying characterized by imbalance of power. In this way, it was ascertained that the acts that were brought up in the discussion were not carried out in a friendly or playful manner.

The prominence of bullying stories in the interviews is indicative that adolescent students perceive bullying to have legitimacy. Validity of the findings was also confirmed with the generation of rich believable data, while content validity dealt with the examination of the various things said on the given topic. From the extensive sets of questions that formed part of the interview schedule (see the Appendix), we present the early adolescents' arguments about bullying experience and family factors.

Some students suggested reasons as to why others bullied, while others explained the reasons why they bully. Some spoke from the point of view of the victim, while others from that of the witness. Even though many studies interpret their findings depending on the child's role in the bullying situation, the participants in the present study were not labeled as bully, victim, witness, etc., since the authors believe that that most students are likely to fall into more than one of these categories (Williams 2008). Therefore, although their experiences were from the roles of bully, victim, bully-victim witness, they were not identified as being any one of these. Rather, the area of interest was in the ways that adolescents explain the incidence of bullying at school in relation to their interpretation of parenting issues and family factors.

During the group session, the participants felt relaxed and there was an immediate rapport between them and the moderator (the first author, a qualified and experienced clinical psychologist who has been working with children and adolescents for many years). Overall, the group discussions were lively and rich in arguments, with a strong sense of collaboration among the group members.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Krueger (1988) considers focus groups as the most appropriate methodological tool when participants of a study already belong to a group and are familiar with group discussion and arguing. This also applies to students that work as a group in the class.

<sup>9</sup> The questions used in the semistructured interview were first piloted in a context where adolescents were asked to talk about their social relationships at school and in the family.

<sup>10</sup> There were some awkward or violent "sensitive moments" (Kitzinger and Farquhar 1999, Parkes 2009) with analytical interest, but are outside the scope of the present paper.

## Analysis of the interviews

The group discussions lasted approximately 1 h 30 min and, with the permission of the participants, were tape-recorded; the tapes were then transcribed verbatim. The researcher conducting the groups was also taking notes during the data collection in order to assist in accuracy and transcription; note taking formed the basis for beginning the analysis procedures. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) content-based discourse analysis and the key concepts of Billig's (1987) rhetorical psychology provided the framework for the data analysis. Participants' discourses were studied for the interpretative repertoires the students used as resources for their views (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

The analysis was facilitated by QSR NVivo, a computer-based program designed for qualitative analysis (Richards 1999). In brief, there were several stages in the analytical process: the first stage involved the segmentation of transcripts that was largely determined by the main research questions (Potter and Wetherell 1987). At the end of the first stage, new categories (tree nodes) were constructed in NVivo, which included all the exchanges referring to the same topic, that is, students' talk about family factors explaining or contributing to bullying. The second stage involved the search for regularities in the participants' accounts and indexing of the material in terms of common lines of argument (Wetherell et al. 2001). At this stage, data based on the commonalities of the discourse were reorganized and additional categories (child nodes) were created. After identifying common lines of argument and interpretative repertoires in the students' discourses, the issue of which specific extracts should be included in the final analysis was addressed. The quotations included were selected on the basis of their clarity in illustrating the themes considered. Excerpts are labeled "western," "eastern," or "central" to denote the participating schools. The student names appearing in the extracts have, of course, been changed.<sup>11</sup> Pauses are indicated by commas or full stops.<sup>12</sup> The second author translated the selected extracts presented. Although not a professional translator,<sup>13</sup> the requirements of a culturally informed conceptualization of the contextual meaning of the participants' talk were adhered to (Temple and Young 2004). Prior to the translation, the first and second authors discussed what had occurred during the data collection, with the intention to enhance the conceptual and contextual trustworthiness of the translated extracts.

## Results

During the discussion groups, the adolescents offered three main themes related to bullying in the context of family factors: (a) difficult home environment with many conflicts between the spouses or between the parents and the adolescent (this theme appeared in eight out of the eight group discussions<sup>14</sup>), (b) parental overprotection (this theme appeared in five out of

<sup>11</sup> Where talk has been omitted this is marked by [...] in the text. Words in parenthesis indicate comments on behalf of the interviewer that clarify the content of the excerpt, e.g., acting as bully.

<sup>12</sup> The letters stand for the following: a—first form of high school (12–13 year-olds), b—second form (13–14 year-olds), c—third form (14–15 year-olds). The numbers refer to the specific classes as there may be more than one class in the form depending on the size of the school, e.g., a 2 stands for the second classroom of first formers.

<sup>13</sup> He has been living in England for over 10 years where he was trained and is working as a researcher and therapist with children and adolescents in a number of research and therapeutic institutes.

<sup>14</sup> The numbers describe the number of peer groups in which the specific theme was used. As already mentioned, the participants recounted one or more incidents of bullying in 8 out of the 14 groups.

the eight group discussions), lack of supervision (this theme appeared in three out of the eight group discussions), or excessive control (this theme appeared in five out of the eight group discussions), and (c) domestic abuse (this theme appeared in four out of the eight group discussions).

It should be stated that, despite evidence that adolescence is a period of seeking independence and autonomy (Younnis and Smollar 1985), the participating students acknowledged the socialization influences of their families. Their views on bullying often came down to what they had seen and lived in the home, apart from what they had experienced at school and in their peer group (Bibou-Nakou 2007b).

#### Difficult home environment

Some participants commented on the bad relationships, particularly between their parents, as illustrated in the following extract.

#### *Western c3*

Anna: It is mainly the home...things are pretty bad there; the relationship among us is not good.

Maria: It was the same with my family, but things have changed now, [it's] much better, much better.

Anna: Well, you see my parents are divorced. I live with my mum. Some years ago, there were a lot of fights, they would shout at each other most of the times. Now it seems that they get on pretty well...they are together: I mean, ok, they are not together, but still they don't fight the way they used to. I believe this is a reason why I started doing it (behaving as a bully). Still, I have got a lot of problems with my mother, she is like a stranger to me, well, we keep fighting all the time; it is between her and me now.

Kiki: I ...what can I say, just another happy family (ironically). Well, my mother left us some time ago. So I live with my father and my brother, both men.

Anna: What do you mean she left? Where did she go?

Kiki: She left just like that, she went away, and now, my dad doesn't seem to understand what I am going through. He always talks about his problems, there is no time left for me. He won't discuss what the matter is with me, you know. And the times that we start talking, he never supports me; he is never on my side.

Empirical evidence clearly supports the suggestions that the sources of distress that divorce precipitates for children are many and substantial (Nickerson et al. 2009) and that marital conflicts and destructive criticism between the couple affects the whole family (Bentovim et al. 1987; Underwood et al. 2009). Furthermore, the parents' conflict resolution styles are related to adolescent adjustment (Collins and Laursen 1992) and destructive conflict resolution, such as that described by Anna, does not help children and young adolescents to solve problems outside the home effectively. Adolescents, who learn to use coercive behavior in family situations from their parents, are more likely to behave similarly in their interactions with others outside the home (Morretti et al. 2006). Jimenez et al. (2010), from a community approach of bullying, found that openness of communication and constructive conflict resolution were significant factors contributing to the reduction of victimization experiences for 11- to 18-year-old adolescents. When relationships between parents become strained, the children are faced with potential conflicts (such as verbal abuse,

anger, or attacks) that they have to cope with. The participants, as can be seen from the following extract, argued that the experience of such a family situation does not help them at all feel secure at home.

Anna: Well, it is the same with my mother.

Kiki: (Interrupting Anna) I am not through yet. He is quite nice, he is really nice (referring to her father). He does favors for me and all that, but we still shout a lot at each other. Sometimes I feel like leaving home, I have been thinking about it [...]. I would like to be able to talk to him, I would like him to understand me, to be able to hold a proper conversation, to talk about what is going on in my life, the way we did with my mum.

Kiki mentions that there is no proper communication with her father who seems unable to understand her problems. This lack of empathy has been researched as an important factor of aggression and bullying and has been liaised with emotional needs within the family, parental warmth, and children's social functioning (Curtner-Smith et al. 2006). Stella, in the following extract, shares a similar pattern with her father, whereas Savas sounds like he has found a way to distance himself from problems such as these.

Stella: We used to have the same problems in the past. My parents got married very young, and maybe this is the reason that there were so many fights at home. I don't get on well with my dad either; I can't stand him shouting all the time.

Savas: Well, everybody has got some sort of problem with their home. Ok, my parents have separated etc., but I am ok, there is no problem, I live with my uncle. I get on well with both of them (parents) but they seem to have big problems, they keep fighting all time.

Based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth in Canada, Beran (2009) proposes a model that confirms the association of adolescent victimization and experience of non-nurturing, rejecting behavior from their parents.

Summing up, marital discord and the continuation of fighting even after the separation, in combination with lack of parental warmth and affection, are discursively organized in the participants' talk as contributing factors to bullying, a finding that is also confirmed by other studies (Christie-Mizell 2003; Rigby et al. 1999).

Parental overprotection, lack of supervision/regulation, or extreme control?

In the following extract, Kostas describes family functioning as being a protective factor against bullying and goes on to stress the importance of the protection and security that are provided by appropriate parenting.

*Eastern b5*

Kostas: It has a lot to do with the parents, the family. If your family is good, if they talk with you, they give you advice, if they trust you, I believe that you don't get involved (in bullying). I mean, if the children feel that they are loved, that they are supported, there is no reason for them to behave badly. Even if something goes wrong, this particular child will turn to their parents; they would talk together to work out what is best at that time.

Bowers et al. (2010) suggest that maternal warmth and a positive home environment serve as protective factors in the case of the child being bullied at school. This is in line with

Yeung and Leadbeater (2010) who, based on a longitudinal study of 580 adolescents, found that high levels of emotional support from the family moderated the negative outcomes of physical victimization.

In the following extract, Eleni comments on some parents being overprotective, which, she argues, can potentially cause many problems for the children.

Eleni: I believe that sometimes parents are too protective. They don't understand that their children are growing up. They treat them as if they were babies. These children can't cope successfully; they don't believe in themselves, they feel inferior. They believe that they can't handle things and that they always need someone else to help them work out problems. I mean, in this way they can easily become the victims of students who are looking for trouble and fights. You see, when overprotected, you can't stand up for yourself when you are left on your own.

According to Eleni, overprotective parents are responsible for the lack of self-confidence and the victimization of their children. Georgiou (2008), in his study of 252 12-year-old students, found that overprotective mothering was linked to an increased risk of bullying, while Nickerson et al. (2009) point to the association of enmeshment with children's victimization. Further, Eleni, in the following extract, claims that students in the role of victim may view themselves as helpless either because they have developed an overdependent emotional attachment to a parent or because they have formed a self-concept that is inadequate to counter such difficult situations as is bullying.

Eleni: Do you remember Hara? Her mother was behind her all the time. She would not let her come down and play with us; she was worried all the time that something bad might happen to her. She felt as if she had to protect her from ...I don't know from what. Hara seemed so scared without her. She became an easy target at school, since many children would tease or exclude her from their group and she (Hara) could do nothing.

Further, harsh and excessive parental control often leads to bullying, according to the following extracts. Xenia, thus, claims that families with histories of a lack of trust and an authoritarian disciplinary style have children who are involved in bullying.

#### *Central a6*

Xenia: I believe that the family plays an important role. A lot of their behavior (she is referring to her classmates) depends on their parents. I remember a classmate—she had a lot of problems with her family. They would control her excessively; they did not trust her at all. Her father kept a watch over her the whole time she was out; and then at school, she would behave like that, she would make fun of others, she got herself into trouble most of the time, she was a real bully.

Further down, Georgia and Xenia place a high value on spending time with parents. In their opinion, it is difficult for parents who work multiple jobs or have busy work schedules and other responsibilities to be committed to their families.

Georgia: There are some other parents that are quite the opposite. I mean, they don't look after their children. They don't care about them, they don't know where they (their children) are, what they are doing. They just give them money and the children go around spending it and keeping bad company.

Xenia: Maybe their parents work a lot for a better life and they (the children) don't care, I mean they don't seem to appreciate what their parents are doing.

Orestis: Their parents work throughout the entire day and they don't keep an eye on their children. They don't know where they are and how they spend their time. I believe that this does not prevent them from getting involved in trouble.

Xenia: [...]. And then at school, they fight a lot for no reason at all.

Both Orestis and Xenia acknowledge that parental regulation, that is, provision of structure, limit setting, monitoring, and supervision, as well as consistent discipline are factors that relate to bullying.

#### Domestic abuse

There is evidence to suggest that children engaged in bullying practices are more likely to have been abused by someone within the family (Lepisto et al. 2010; Perry et al. 2001). In addition, in some cases, parental drug addiction, harsh punishment, and lack of family structure co-occur, leading to a wide range of victimizations, as illustrated in the following extract.

#### *Eastern c1*

Elli: I had a lot of problems at home. I grew up with a father that was a drug addict. He would beat both me and my mother.

Katerina: My father too, he would beat my mum. They eventually got a divorce and he got married again. He has no contact with me, now. Once a year he might give us a ring to see if we are still alive. I remember that when we lived together, there was a lot of shouting and fights. Every now and again, he would attack my mother.

Incidents of domestic violence act as factors that reinforce bullying. Children who are witness to it have been found among those that either experience or exert bullying practices (Finkelhor et al. 2008; Shields and Cicchetti 2001).

Elli: Well, the only thing that really matters to me is to feel safe, nothing else. I don't really mind if they swear at me or if they insult me (referring to her classmates). I am used to it. All these years that's the way my father treated me. And now, I don't really care if they behave towards me like this (referring to the other students). I get them back the same way, sometimes. I am not that interested. To tell you the truth, I don't feel anything. It is like they (referring to her parents) have made me feel like trash.

Elli talks about the humiliating way she is treated at home, which makes her feel completely worthless. The shaming experiences she has encountered within her family are strongly related to victimization (Arseneault et al. 2010; Aslund et al. 2008). At another level, Elli's main concern seems to be to talk more about the family abuse she is exposed to and less about the act of bullying itself. That is, bullying at school as a threat is associated to other areas of family life, such as being exposed to domestic violence, harsh disciplinary practices, or conflicts. In spite of this fact, schools and psychological services alike pay little attention to linking students' worries and concerns with family situations, even when the theory and the conceptualization of these issues are similar (Rigby 1996; Shields and Cicchetti 2001). According to Finkelhor et al. (2008), this is due to the fragmentation of child and adolescent psychosocial services, which has, in effect, diminished awareness of the seriousness and the actual magnitude of child victimization, as it hinders, among other

things, the integration of findings from different areas of children's daily lives. Relevant research (Raskauskas 2010) has shown that children who experience multiple peer victimization report lower self-esteem and self-blame attribution in comparison to children who do not experience victimization.

## Discussion

The present study collaborated with 14 groups of 90 adolescent students in order to discuss bullying in relation to their familial context. Research which seeks the views of adolescent students themselves gives important insight not only into how the students experience bullying practices but also how they negotiate and address problems. According to the findings of this study, the family factors that appear to affect adolescents' bullying behavior or experience at school are high levels of marital conflict, inadequate parenting styles, and domestic violence with abusive practices. Once more, it needs to perhaps be stated that, during the group discussions, it was not known who of the participants were the bully, victim, bully-victim, or witness in the stories related, whether it was the speaker or someone else, for instance, as this was not the researchers' intention. The main concern was to have the students talking openly and freely about the family factors that they considered affected bullying. Overall, the participating students claimed that those more likely to engage in bullying behavior appear to have less supportive relationships with their parents that are lacking in warmth and empathy. On the other hand, the victims are perceived as having overly close and emotionally intense, overprotective relationships with parents. These findings confirm patterns in the international literature on bullying and its relation to familial factors (Bowers et al. 2010; Idsoe et al. 2008; McGrath et al. 2009; Nickerson et al. 2009).

Although the present study shows that some participants perceive their parents and family context in the aforementioned ways, the findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that parents be blamed for adolescent bullying and victimization at school. As Taki (2010) stresses, the family factors that are perceived by young people as causal factors in bullying cannot explain the whole bullying incident, although these should be acknowledged as risk factors that correlate highly with bullying experiences.

What does, however, become clear from the students' talk is that antibullying interventions need to widen their focus beyond the school setting and embrace concerns about family and parenting. This clearly poses a serious challenge for education authorities to develop accessible, nonstigmatizing, preventive approaches that support the family and regenerate their role in the community, more generally, by strengthening home-school and psychosocial services partnerships. A policy direction in children and adolescents' services, which aims at integration and increasing the sharing of information among a range of educational, welfare, and psychosocial health professionals, is needed. In other words, the results of this study present evidence to suggest that we need to extend the intervention strategies for bullying beyond the classroom to the broader community. In this way, families become essential partners in dealing with the problem of bullying (Bacchini et al. 2008). The study results also show that it is of the utmost importance to take into consideration the strengths and the limits of students' families when planning intervention programs for the prevention or curbing of bullying. Informative modules on bullying that target the family could stimulate better family functioning in terms of communication and regulation and could lead to the development of suitable home-school collaboration. There is recent and well-documented evidence to suggest that family involvement should be included in antibullying programs (Farrington and Ttofi 2009). It becomes apparent that children who are bullied

rarely share this problem with their parents (Olweus 1978). By sensitizing families to school bullying, parents and carers are able to become aware of and better recognize the problem. In addition, they reflectively experience their involvement as important and significant persons, form active and stable collaborations with the school communities, and comfort their children as victims, observers, or bullies—victims; these last would be able to participate in effective interventions to help them cope with their children as bullies (Farrington and Ttofi 2009).

Although the present study contributes to our understanding of family patterns and predictors of bullying among a sample of young adolescent students, some limitations need to be noted. Firstly, the accounts of family functioning were based solely on students' reports. As previously mentioned, the participating schools had not adopted or developed any antibullying policy—as is the case for the majority of the Greek schools—and school or classroom attitudes are not examined in the present study. Future investigations would be aided by including other informants, such as the parents or the teachers, as well as observational assessments of children and parent relationships. The inclusion of parental accounts, for example, or their attitudes towards bullying would help contextualize their relationships in a more meaningful and integrative way. A second limitation is that parent–adolescent relationships are characterized by bidirectionality, which indicates that parents and adolescents mutually influence each others' behaviors. For instance, temperamental or personality characteristics may affect the way the family functions. According to Connolly and O'Moore (2003), the experience of children who come from less cohesive or more dysfunctional families may be related to their personality characteristics,<sup>15</sup> an approach previously adopted by Olweus (1978) some decades prior. The present study, however, concentrates on discourses and relations rather than personalities and temperamental characteristics. This enables to shift the focus away from seeing bullying as something that is simply a component of individual students' temperaments; instead, it views bullying as a discursively organized phenomenon, closely related to the various social environments of students, of which the family context is one.

Given these study limitations, we strongly believe that more work is needed to better understand how perceived child–parent relationships according to children's and adolescents' views relate to bullying and victimization. Similarly, future studies would benefit by including different patterns in the parental relationships of children according to their gender and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to explore how these factors influence the role of parent–child interactions and bullying.

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## Appendix

### Interview schedule of the focus groups

The interview schedule covered issues such as:

1. Let's talk about your social relationships at school, what are these, how do you feel about them in comparison to other settings, e.g., at home?

<sup>15</sup> Connolly and O'Moore (2003), in their study of 228 students aged 6–16, found that bullies showed greater difficulty in expressing their emotions freely towards their family members and had an ambivalent relationship with their parents.

2. How do you make friends, tell me more about your friends, what are they like, your feelings about them (ways of cultivating, testing, and maintaining friendships and developing a social identity)?
3. Issues of disputes and conflict in peer relations.
4. How are conflicts important in your daily activities and peer cultures, issues on cooperation, and competition?
5. Incidence of bad experiences in terms of your social relationships at school.
6. Sources of support when facing bad experiences. How do you manage situations such as social distance and peers' unfriendly behavior?

If a narrative of bullying emerges within the students' discussion groups, questions about the bullying experience are asked, such as the following:

- (a) Nature of bullying.
- (b) Impact of living with bullying—how do bullying experiences influence relationships and welfare. Long-term impact of bullying experiences.
- (c) Ways of dealing with bullying experiences.
- (d) Responses of helping agencies.

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**Ioanna Bibou-Nakou**, Associate professor of Clinical and School Psychology, Faculty of Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. E-mail: bibou@eled.auth.gr

*Current themes of research:*

Mental health for schools. Parental mental illness and children's well being. Migration and schooling.

*Relevant publications in the field of education:*

- Bibou-Nakou, I., A. Stogiannidou, & G. Kiosseoglou (1999). The relation between teacher burnout and teachers' attributions and practices regarding school behavior problems. *School Psychology International*, 20, 2, 209–217.
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**John Tsiantis**, Professor of Child Psychotherapy, President of European Union of Medical Specialists Section of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Scientific Director of the Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children & Adolescents, Athens, Greece. E-mail: itsianti@med.uoa.gr

*Current themes of research:*

Child and adolescent mental health. Community child and adolescent psychiatric services. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy and teachers' training.

*Relevant publications in the field of education:*

- H. Dikaiou, V. Iliopoulos, & J. Tasakou (1st edition, 2008). *Talk, don't be afraid: three stories about school violence*. Association for the Psychosocial Health of Children & Adolescents, Scientific Director Prof. J. Tsiantis Athens, Greece.
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Bullying/victimization from a family perspective

**Harisios Assimopoulos**, Associate professor, Department of Social Work, Technological Educational Institution, Athens. E-mail: [assimopoulos@epsype.gr](mailto:assimopoulos@epsype.gr)

*Current themes of research:*

Social work with the family. Social work in health-mental health. Social work with children and adolescents. Social research in social work

*Relevant publications in the field of education:*

- Assimopoulos, H., Giannakopoulou, D., Hatzipemou, T., Soumaki, E., Diareme, S., & Tsiantis, J. (2007). Bulling in the primary school: Students' and Teachers' views. *Child & Adolescent. Mental Health and Psychopathology*. Athens, Kastaniotis, 10(1):97–110.
- Giannakopoulou, D., Diareme, S., Soumaki, E., Hatzipemou, T., Assimopoulos, H., & Tsiantis, J. (2010). Needs assessment and awareness about bullying in primary schools in the area of Athens. *Psychology*, 17 (2), 156–175.

**Persa Chatzilambou**, Clinical Psychologist, Psychotherapist, Private Practice. E-mail: [persefonic@gmail.com](mailto:persefonic@gmail.com)

*Current themes of research:*

Migration and schooling. Cognitive behaviour therapy with children and adolescents. Peer tutoring. Psychometric testing for dyslexia.

*Relevant publications in the field of education:*

- Bibou, I., Persa Chatzilambou & Antoniadou, E. (chapter to be published) Negotiating children's social space: peer support groups in the school context.