

# The experience of bullying among secondary school students

[Sociology](#), [Bullying](#)



Psychology in the Schools, Vol. 47(4), 2010 Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com) © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. DOI: 10.1002/pits.20473 THE EXPERIENCE OF BULLYING AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS CHRISTINA ATHANASIADES AND VASSILIKI DELIYANNI-KOUMITZIS School of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki The present study was designed to qualitatively investigate secondary students' interpretations and experiences of bullying (and victimization) in Greek schools, with a focus on gender similarities and differences. Overall, 95 students (50 boys and 45 girls), 15 or 16 years old, participated in focus group interviews that were homogeneous in terms of grade and gender. Data analysis, using the interpretative phenomenological approach, showed that different interpretations and meanings of bullying between genders have important consequences on actual behavior. Furthermore, students do not reveal bullying and victimization to either parents or teachers, who are described as indifferent and ineffective. Results are indicative of a school culture that is conducive to bullying behaviors and have important implications for antibullying interventions. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. A common definition of bullying among researchers involves aggression, intention, repetition, and an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2002; Smith, 2000). Bullying may be direct, verbal, and indirect or relational, such as gossiping, spreading rumors, and social exclusion (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000; Smith, 2000, 2004). Apart from violating the rights of children to have a safe school climate, bullying has many long-term and devastating effects on both bullies and victims (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Ma, Stewin, & Mah,

2001; Olweus, 1993). Victims often respond with avoidance behaviors, a decline in academic performance, a loss of self-esteem, and, in extreme cases, with suicide or killing bullies. In contrast, bullies carry their social problems into adulthood and are likely to engage more in criminal activities or abuse their spouse and children. The high prevalence of school bullying in many European and other western countries (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Menesini et al., 1997; Smith & Brain, 2000; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson & Liefvooghe, 2002) in relation with the modest effectiveness of most antibullying programs (Rigby, 2004) emphasizes the need for more effective research strategies, theoretical interpretations, and interventions regarding bullying. According to Rigby (2004), different perspectives on the causes of bullying have different implications regarding intervention strategies. For example, theorizing bullying as the outcome of individual differences directs our attention to either those students who are likely to become aggressive or to students who are likely to be more vulnerable than others. Working with these students involves usually disciplinary methods, behavior modification, and counseling. In contrast, a sociocultural approach to bullying, which relates bullying with the construction of gender or ethnic identity and with power differentials, focuses on the ways that school curriculum in general can influence students to accept and respect differences among them. Relevant research has shown a trend toward gender differences in preferred forms of aggression, with boys being generally more aggressive than girls and girls being predominately more indirectly aggressive than boys, especially during adolescence (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Salmivalli &

Kaukiainen, 2004; Smith et al., 2002; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Furthermore, researchers found that boys were more frequently designated, through self and peer evaluations, as bullies than were girls and that boys more often participated in bullying. This project was cofunded by the European Union—European Social Fund and National Resources (EPEAEKII). Official permission for the research within schools was granted by the Greek Ministry of Education and the corresponding agency of the Pedagogic Institution. We thank all the students who participated in our research and made this piece of work possible. Correspondence to: Christina Athanasiades, Faculty of Philosophy, School of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 54124 Thessaloniki, Greece. E-mail: cathan@psy.auth.gr

328 The Experience of Bullying

329 as reinforcers and assistants, whereas girls were outsiders and defenders (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Kaukiainen, 1996). That is, even if boys do not actively initiate bullying, they may either follow a leading bully or reinforce his behavior by laughing or watching the act. In contrast, girls usually take either the role of the outsider, who does not get involved, or the role of the defender, who is supportive to the victim and tries to stop bullying. In research about the role of peer support systems as a type of intervention to combat bullying in schools (Cowie, 2000), gender differences were also found in the strategies that children use to respond to peer aggression. For example, boys were more reluctant than girls to disclose victimization to teachers and friends, and those boys who attended mixed sex schools were also hesitant to make use of their school's peer support system or to volunteer as peer supporters. Cowie (2000) concluded that boys and girls differ in their perception of social relationships and that

many boys prefer to hide their caring abilities or empathy for others, particularly when they find themselves in a context in which this action may not be perceived as "masculine." It has been generally recognized that the socially constructed nature of masculinity leads to violence and aggression, which is also approved of or even expected, whereas girls are expected to behave in more empathetic, caring, and helping ways as part of their female social role (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Watson, 2007; Young & Sweeting, 2004). In a study about the role of verbal abuse among teenage students, it was found that verbal abuse functions as a cultural resource for the construction of hegemonic masculinities, as well as of power relations between boys and girls (Eliasson, Isaksson, & Lai, 2007). Therefore, abuse coming from popular "tough" boys was usually rendered legitimate and invisible, because it was often excused as unintentional or as a joke. In contrast, girls' involvement either as aggressors or as victims of verbal abuse was not similarly advantageous for their femininity. Lahelma (2002) also showed that adolescent boys' sexual harassing behavior, which is usually taken for granted, constitutes a way of social control that maintains gender boundaries and hierarchies within schools. Despite this evidence, researchers acknowledge that there are no causal links between certain types of aggression and gender identity (Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Yubero & Navarro, 2006). On the contrary, they infer that, in a process of continuously "changing" gender identities, adolescents may use forms of aggression that are not compatible with their gender roles or others' expectations. For example, research data from Estonia proved that boys were more directly as well as indirectly aggressive than girls, thus

challenging previous findings that relate girls exclusively with indirect aggressive strategies (Peets & Kikas, 2006). Furthermore, theoretical explanations of bullying among girls or the construction of femininity that deviates from traditional female roles have been neglected, primarily because boys predominate in aggressive incidents (Rigby, 2004; Yubero & Navarro, 2006). School Bullying in Greece In Greece, the phenomenon of school violence had been initially studied within the general discourse of social exclusion; thus, initiatives were mostly related to students' dropping out, racist attitudes, substance abuse, and issues of multicultural education (Artinopoulou, 2001). According to Pateraki and Houndoumadi (2001), who attempted to document the existence and extent of bullying in a large sample of elementary school students in Athens, 14.7% of the pupils were self-identified as victims, 6.2% as bullies, and 4.8% as bully/victims. The researchers also confirmed gender differences regarding bullying incidents, because boys were bullied more often than girls and girls were more often involved in indirect bullying. Another study in elementary schools aimed to investigate students' attitudes as well as their involvement in bullying (Boulton, Karellou, Lanitis, Manoussou, & Lemoni, 2001). Results showed Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10.1002/pits.330 Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzi a high prevalence of aggressive incidents and victimization among students, especially among boys' groups. On the whole, students' attitudes were against aggressive behaviors; however, these attitudes were more prevalent within girls and younger students. There was also a positive correlation between students' attitudes toward aggressive acts and the level of their participation in aggressive incidents at school,

that, according to the researchers, has to be taken into account in future intervention strategies. More recently, a series of studies have employed complex quantitative methods to measure correlations between different variables (e. g., social intelligence, self-efficacy, academic and social cognition) and aggressive behavior or any behavior in bullying situations among elementary school students (Andreou, 2006; Andreou & Metallidou, 2004; Andreou, Vlachou, & Didaskalou, 2005). Although findings are important regarding the general research on bullying, these studies deal basically with bully/victim problems from a sociocognitive dimension, focusing on intrapersonal individual students' abilities or deficiencies. Overall, research findings indicate that bullying is a serious problem in Greek schools; however, there is still no national school policy concerning the phenomenon of bullying and victimization (Kalliotis, 2000; Smith, Nika, & Papasideri, 2004). In contrast, most studies have been small scale, have investigated bullying only within primary education, have focused on individual students (bullies or victims), and have adopted exclusively quantitative methods. Results indicate the need for further and more in-depth investigation of bullying that addresses the experience of both primary and secondary students, as well as their coping strategies toward bullying and victimization within the school context. The present study was conducted as part of a larger-scale research project, which aims to research bullying in Greek secondary education as well as its relation to gender and ethnic identity, adopting both quantitative and qualitative measures. According to the quantitative results (Psalti & Constantinou, 2007), more than 10% of Greek secondary school students experience bullying

systematically, and 35% are concerned about being victimized in their schools. Moreover, a significantly higher percentage of victims are boys, with the exception of verbal bullying, which was similarly evident in both boys and girls. Purpose of the Study Espelage and Swearer (2003, p. 379), reporting the major insights gained from research on bullying, concluded that "bullying is a complex interaction that needs to be studied using multivariate methods." To date, a smaller number of studies on school bullying have adopted qualitative methodologies that focus on context and on interactions among students (e. g., Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Ter" sahjo & Salmivalli, 2003). Researchers support that many aspects of school a context (such as the nature of academic instruction, classroom management and discipline, as well as social interaction) have been underinvestigated and that all deserve greater attention either as contributing factors or in preventive measures (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Ma et al., 2001; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). The present study was designed to qualitatively investigate secondary students' interpretations and experiences of bullying, with a focus on gender similarities and differences. Theoretically, our research draws on symbolic interactionism and social constructionism (Burr, 1995), within which interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has been used to understand the students' "lived experience" and interpretation of bullying, rather than to measure the frequency of the phenomenon (Smith, 1995; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This type of analysis is particularly indicated when researchers are concerned with complexity, processes, or controversial and personal issues. Furthermore, phenomenological methods, in contrast with positivistic ones, enable



researchers to gain understanding of psychological issues and constructs through “the eyes of the participants rather than the researchers” (Ma et al., 2001, p. 263). Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10.1002/pits The Experience of Bullying 331 Using a qualitative research design and focus group interviewing, our purpose was to understand how students jointly construct bullying within the context of their social relations and interactions, and whether bullying is constructed differently with respect to gender.

Acknowledging that meaning is produced collaboratively within focus groups interpreted from a social constructionist framework (Wilkinson, 2003), we thought that in this way we would give students the opportunity to negotiate, challenge, or even modify their understandings of bullying within the context of the discussion. Although a range of issues was covered during the interviews, this article reports on material relating to similarities and differences between genders regarding (a) the students’ definitions of bullying, (b) their experiences of bullying behaviors, and (c) their communication with parents and teachers with regard to bullying and victimization. We have assumed that the interpretations coming from the students’ focus group interviews are indicative of their informal interactions within schools and, more important, critical for effective interventions. METHOD Participants In deciding who or how many participants should be recruited, we considered our research questions, time, and resources available. Having in mind the idiographic mode of inquiry, the need for homogeneity (Smith & Osborn, 2003), as well as the concept of “maximum variation” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), we assumed that gender, age, and school culture are likely to be important in understanding the experience of

bullying among secondary school students. Therefore, we followed a purposive sampling procedure to locate participants who would be interested in and able to provide critical information to our study (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Willig, 2001). Overall, 95 secondary school students, 50 boys and 45 girls, participated in the focus group interviews. Students were 15–16 years old (i. e., ninth and tenth graders), with the majority of them being Greek—only eight students had a different ethnic background (Albanian). Students were recruited from eight public schools in which, based on the quantitative data (Psalti & Constantinou, 2007), the percentages of victimization reflected the mean percentage of students' victimization in Greek secondary education (that is between 10% and 13%). The eight schools represented various geographical areas (i. e., north and south, urban and semiurban, and the islands). At each school we explained the aims of the study and asked students to volunteer for the interviews. Because bullying is a group phenomenon (Salmivalli et al., 1996), we assumed that most children are somehow involved in the process and have a participant role, either as reinforcer and assistant of bullying, or as outsider and defender. Thus, instead of differentiating between bullies and victims, we preferred to incorporate a variety of students' experiences and discourses as representative of the whole school culture (or ethos) regarding bullying. Following our instructions, a number of students consented to participate in the group interviews; they had the right to quit any time. We also reassured students about the confidential nature of the interview process and their anonymity regarding the research results. Focus Group Interviews On the whole, we conducted 16 focus groups separated by grade and gender—two in

each school, one with boys and one with girls. Each group included six to seven students, because ideal numbers are no fewer than 4 and no more than 12 participants (Krueger, 1988). Boys' focus group interviews were conducted by two male researchers (one moderator and one assistant), and girls' focus group interviews were conducted by two female researchers. It has been suggested that group homogeneity reduces conformity among participants, enhancing a more diverse expression of opinions, particularly if these are different from that of the dominant culture or other social Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits 332 Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Furthermore, focus group interviewing has many advantages compared to individual interviews (Wilkinson, 2003; Willig, 2001), such as the opportunity to stimulate a wider range of information among participants that are more spontaneous and less conventional, within a secure and familiar context of social setting and interaction. Focus group interviews were semistructured and informal, although they were guided by a predetermined set of questions and probes stretching for the research objectives (see Appendix). The moderators started by reading aloud a hypothetical scenario of bullying to facilitate and reinforce students' participation in such a sensitive topic as school violence (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Interviews (one per focus group) took place within schools, lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours, and were completed within a 2-month period (April and May 2007). All of them were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the informed consent of the participants and exclusively for research purposes. Data Analysis Transcripts were read many times and then classified accordingly to identify common

themes as well as differences, contradictions, or variations between boys' and girls' groups. Considering the huge bulk of data and our research questions, we were primarily interested in similarities and variations between boys' and girls' groups, rather than within each gender group. According to IPA, our method of analysis followed certain stages: (a) becoming familiar with each interview transcript and keeping preliminary notes, (b) identifying and labeling emerging themes for each interview, (c) connecting the themes of each interview together and in relation to data, and (d) integrating the themes of all interviews (Smith, 1995; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In the selection of the results presented in this article, we classified common themes as well as variations between genders into the following superordinate categories: (a) meanings of bullying, (b) forms of bullying, and (c) communication with parents and teachers regarding victimization (see Table 1). Categories and themes are discussed together with excerpts from the students' interviews. The transcription conventions used in this article follow the Jefferson system (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and stress readability, as excerpts have been translated from Greek to English.

Table 1 Classification of Data Meanings of Bullying a. Definitions

Threat, fear, control, and domination b. Evaluations Boys either underestimate or justify bullying. Girls show an empathetic understanding toward victims or "camouflage" bullying among them. c. Effects on victims Boys talk about effects on others; they use the third person. Girls talk about personal experiences; they use the first person. Forms of Bullying a. Frequency Bullying happens to everybody; however, it is more frequent among boys. b. Location Bullying happens everywhere; however, it happens

mostly in the playground, during breaks. c. Different forms of bullying Boys engage more in physical bullying. Girls engage more in verbal and indirect bullying. d. Interpretation of differences Boys are physically stronger than girls. Girls are naturally more mature than boys. Communication with Parents and Teachers a. Disclosure or silence? Students do not disclose victimization; girls are more revealing than are boys to parents and friends. b. Interpretations of silence b1. Appropriate with male identity. b2. Parents are ineffective; they make things worse, especially for boys/victims. b3. Teachers are both indifferent and ineffective. Teachers are either aware of and do nothing to prevent bullying, or their usual interventions are totally ineffective. Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits The Experience of Bullying 333 Concerning reliability and validity, which are nevertheless evaluated differently in qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Horsburgh, 2003; Perakyla, 1997), we would like to make the following points: (a) We have tried to be explicit and transparent with regard to our methodology, assuming that the reader will be able to evaluate the whole research process as well as our interpretations, which are grounded on the students' discourse; (b) Data classification has been reviewed by two fellow researchers, who participated in the quantitative study of the same research project on bullying. Identical themes between our categorizations and those of fellow researchers were divided by the total number of themes initially identified, and the level of agreement was 87% (Fleiss, 1971; Landis & Koch, 1977); c) Students were interviewed in peer groups, which resemble more naturally occurring interactions within schools. Again, our intention was to underline the students' perspective and give voice to their

understandings and experiences with regard to bullying and victimization. R

ESULTS Meanings of Bullying This category involves three interrelated

themes: the students' definitions of bullying, their evaluations of bullying behaviors, as well as their evaluations of the effects of victimization. Overall, students referred to bullying as an issue of threat, fear, control, and

domination among students, which is close to the definition of bullying as the systematic abuse of power (Rigby, 2002). For example, boys defined

bullying as an act during which a student " blackmails or threatens someone else to convince him of something" or " to make the other be afraid of him. "

Similarly, girls agreed that bullying means " make someone be scared, that is blackmailing to achieve something. " A female student further explained

that bullying is " whatever one does to provoke fear, either physical or psychological, in order to achieve whatever he or she wants, that may be

totally irrelevant with the issue of the threat. " Boys denied any underlying or " bad" motive behind bullying, as well as the negative consequences of

bullying to victims, assuming that behaviors like these are just " a joke" between them. For example, a male student revealed that " I have made fun

of a few boys many times, just for fun though, not ( . . . ) not because I wanted to do something bad on them, however, in the other school I was, a

student had to leave for that reason. " In the following excerpt, ninth grade boys describing the scenario presented explained that this is " a group

attack. " When the coordinator asked " what do you mean? " the students answered: B1: A few kids gathered and started hitting another kid

(everybody laughs). Coordinator: Does this mean bullying for you?

Everybody together: No. B2: It is just for fun. Furthermore, boys referred

extensively to the reasons that provoke bullying, assigning responsibility even to the victims of bullying. For example, a tenth grade male student explained that sometimes " it is the victim's fault and the other student can not deal with him alone and enlists his friends. " It seems that boys, at least in the beginning of the interviews, tried either to justify bullying or to underestimate and diminish its importance. This does not mean that boys support such aggressive behavior. Most likely, they tried to defend their schools, as well as their involvement in bullying, which according to data is frequent among them and higher compared to girls (Boulton et al., 2001; Psalti & Constantinou, 2007; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits 334 Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis In contrast, girls referred directly to the negative consequences of bullying and to their personal experiences of victimization. Apparently girls evaluated bullying negatively, while at the same time showed an empathetic understanding for the victims of bullying. For example, girls concluded that bullying is " unfair, inhumane and awful, " because most of them had similar past experiences. G1: It may sound extreme, what I am going to say, very extreme, however, I think that this is inhumane in a way, because with this kind of behavior we make them feel like outsiders as if they do not exist, while, there should not be such a treatment. These people (the victims), don't they have feelings, don't they feel? Because, we may have been in the same position and then we are doing it to somebody else. It is not right at all. Because bullying does exists between girls even though they disapprove of it, girls avoided identifying behaviors such as making fun of others and excluding from friendships as bullying. For example, a tenth grade girl

revealed that " if somebody is isolated and others do not want her in their company and make fun of her for this reason, it may be her fault as well. I do not think this is a form of bullying. " We believe that by attributing a different meaning to the above practices—that is, by camouflaging bullying—girls justified their participation in bullying or tried to alleviate guilt. This behavior has been documented elsewhere (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). Students also evaluated the effects of bullying on victims. According to their own words, bullying causes intense fear, reduces self-confidence, isolates students, and creates a negative reaction toward school or school duties that may even result in total absence or change of school environment. For example, a ninth grade boy said that " with such a behavior students terrify in a way the other person ( . . . ) and I believe that they make him feel like ( . . . ) disgusted coming to school. " In contrast, a ninth grade girl confessed that " for me, it was like ( . . . ) I did not want to have any friends. As soon as the bell rang and we had finished school for the day, I only wanted to go home and fall asleep. " Similar to the previous excerpts, when students refer to bullying as well as to victimization, boys tend to use the third person, as if they speak for someone else (the other), whereas girls tend to use the first person, because they refer to their personal experiences (for me). Overall and through the above practices we have assumed that boys and girls position themselves differently with respect to bullying and victimization and independently from their actual involvement. In particular, boys put themselves in the position of bullies, thus they identify more with the bullies, whereas girls put themselves in the position of victims, thus they identify more with the victims. Furthermore, the use of different language between



boys and girls results in different interpretations or constructions of aggressiveness within schools, which also has important implications for actual behavior. Forms of Bullying Themes in this category include frequency and location of bullying, different forms of bullying that are evident between boys and girls, as well as boys' and girls' interpretations of differences. At first, the majority of students claimed that bullying occurs everywhere in schools, is frequent, and happens to everybody (both boys and girls) in a way that is almost considered "typical" behavior- which is also another way of legitimizing bullying. For example, a male student said that bullying "happens everywhere, even from the kid that you do not expect" and that "there is nobody that has not teased somebody else. It is OK, it is typical." Accordingly, a female student explained that "when someone says or does something to tease someone else or to hit him" is something "natural" that takes place every day. Everybody agreed, however, that bullying is more often between younger students (i. e., in elementary school), between boys, and in places that are not supervised by teachers (i. e., the playground, during breaks). Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits The Experience of Bullying 335 Furthermore, boys and girls agreed on the different ways that bullying is expressed among them. In particular, both genders claimed that: (a) bullying is much more frequent between boys, (b) physically aggressive behaviors by boys against girls are inconsistent with the male identity, and (c) boys are more physically violent, whereas girls usually exercise other forms of bullying, both verbal (such as mocking) and indirect (e. g., betraying secrets and spreading rumors), or bullying that has to do with social relationships. In the following excerpt, ninth grade boys talk about these

differences between genders: B1: I believe that boys are doing it (bullying) more because they are stronger, while girls are weaker and they cannot do it. Coordinator: Who are usually the victims, boys or girls? B1 & B2 together: Boys. B2: Boys cannot harm a girl, because girls are weaker and if they harm a girl the others will make fun of them, because they harmed a girl. B3: Boys are bullying others through physical violence, while girls through words ( . . . ) girls usually threaten to betray your secrets, stuff like that. In summary, all students claimed that girls are aggressive with “ words” (meaning verbal or indirect bullying) and that boys are aggressive with certain “ acts” (meaning physical bullying). For example, a ninth grade girl revealed that bullying exists everywhere, not only within boys’ groups. In her own words, however, “ it may be, not exactly bullying, but a girl may say, ‘ if you don’t do this, you won’t be my friend, we don’t want you. ” It is interesting to note that boys as well as girls attributed (and moreover justified) these differences to boys’ physical strength on the one hand and to girls’ maturity on the other hand. In other words, both groups claimed that boys are more short-tempered and aggressive because of their natural physical “ superiority, ” and that girls avoid intense quarrels or conceal them because they are not “ strong” enough, because they talk more about their problems, and because such behaviors are not compatible with the female gender identity. As ninth grade girls characteristically mentioned: G1: And I think that ( . . . ) because girls are not as apt to physical violence as boys, they have developed a perfect form of psychological war, which in these cases, when they use it, it can be more effective than physical violence. G2: Usually girls, as the others girls said already, they react verbally ( . . . ) but

they do not use violence. Besides, it is not appropriate for a girl to be violent, maybe because girls can cope better anyway. When we consider these excerpts, it becomes obvious that gender identity plays an important role in both meanings of bullying as well as in actual bullying behaviors. That is, boys and girls talk about and engage in school bullying differently, according to the socially constructed patterns of behaviors that are gender-appropriate, as well as to the social demands relating to masculinity and femininity, respectively. In short, different language is followed by the reproduction of different behaviors between genders as well as of different reactions toward bullying and victimization.

**Students' Communication with Parents and Teachers** This category discusses whether students disclose bullying and victimization to parents and teachers as well as how students interpret their communication patterns (i. e., their silence with respect to victimization) with adults. For example, answering the question " Have you ever spoken about bullying to somebody else, that is, to teachers and parents? " ninth grade boys claimed that Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits 336 Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis " We have never talked about this before" and that " It is better to keep it to yourself and find the solutions all alone. " Similarly, a female student explained that G1: If bullying happens to me, I will speak with a person who is close to me, that is my friend, my best friend, whom I trust and she will be there for me. Now, if I hear that something happened to somebody else, I won't tell anybody ( . . . ) I will keep it for myself. Furthermore, male students prefer to handle bullying all alone, without the intervention of adults. Boys construct bullying as a personal problem that does not concern the educational process. In addition,

they believe that they, as men, should learn to depend on themselves instead of asking for help, especially from their parents. In the following excerpt, tenth grade boys explain the reasons they do not reveal bullying to teachers and parents. B1: I do not believe that teachers really care; however, it is better this way, because we have to learn how to deal with our problems alone, since this is something that ( . . . ) it is a personal problem, and we are not children anymore, we have grown up in a way, and we have to ( . . . ) maybe, this is a good lesson for us, to learn how to deal with some issues all alone, however hard or difficult this may be. B2: I think that parents will always be there and they will listen to you ( . . . ); however, there is no reason to talk to your parents because this is a personal issue and everybody should try to solve it by himself to a certain extent ( . . . ) when you call your parents to deal with it, the others will characterize you as a wimp, etc., and perhaps they will be right. On the one hand, boys believe that the way they choose to respond to victimization is connected with their male identity and what it means to be masculine. On the other hand, talking to parents has probably even more negative effects for the victims. For example, boys are afraid of being stigmatized as “ sissies” or “ cowards” by their classmates if they disclose victimization and call for their parents’ support. On the contrary, girls are more sincere and open with parents and friends, as this is more compatible with their female identity as well as with their constructions of interpersonal relationships. Referring particularly to their teachers, both boys and girls admitted that they do not disclose victimization, because they believe that teachers are indifferent and ineffective. According to students, teachers of secondary education are indifferent toward bullying, even though

they know what is going on in their schools. For example, both male and female students agreed that B1: Most of the times they (teachers) do not pay any attention. B2: Unless they see something in front of them, and in this case they will do something, they actually do not take any measures. G1: I believe the only reaction of most teachers is to take the child and go to the principal's office to punish him, in case, of course, that the victim has said something. Teachers were also portrayed as ineffective, which means that, even if teachers do show some interest, they do not know what to do to support or to protect students. At the same time, teachers' usual intervention strategies (such as punishments and exclusions) are described by students as completely inconsiderate and ineffective. The following two excerpts, coming from a ninth grade girl and a ninth grade boy, respectively, explain why these students would never inform teachers about bullying: G1: Personally, I would never do it ( . . . ) I did it once and I regretted it because ( . . . ) in front of everybody, in a meeting with parents, the teachers told my parents that your daughter has a problem with another Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits The Experience of Bullying 337 girl, with this girl ( . . . ) you see, I told one teacher and it became a whole issue in the school and in this meeting ( . . . ) I do not trust them any more. B1: ( . . . ) teachers see things differently and maybe, they cannot put themselves in the victim's position, they cannot understand that the only thing the victim wants is to escape, he does not want to do something, to say something so that the others (the bullies) will be excluded from the school, he is only interested in escaping. According to a couple of students, there are also cases in which teachers purposefully conceal bullying in an effort to defend their school and

its climate. Furthermore, some girls described teachers as distant and unable to help, mostly because of their conventional role, their everyday demanding duties, the lack of appropriate resources, as well as the particular alienating circumstances in Greek schools. Characteristically, a female student claimed that teachers do not care about students' personal problems, since there is " isolation (in schools) and a big gap between teachers and students. " D

DISCUSSION The students who participated in our study recognized all different forms of bullying and confessed that bullying in schools is considered almost " typical" behavior among adolescents. In addition, gender identity seemed to modulate both meanings of bullying as well as types of bullying behaviors. Although we acknowledge that students may vary in the degree to which they comply with stereotypical gender attitudes and norms in their everyday interactions, this variation was not particularly evident in the focus group discussions. Gender identity construction in Greece still assumes traditional roles and pathways regarding men's participation in the public and the private sphere; changes are evident, however, in female identity and are primarily connected with women's entrance in the labor market as well as their economic independence (Deliyanni-Kouimtzis & Sakka, 2007). According to the students, boys engage in bullying more often than girls do, and girls use primarily verbal or indirect bullying; forms of bullying have also been interpreted and evaluated differently between genders. Students explained that boys are more aggressive than girls because of their natural physical " superiority"; due to their physical strength, boys insisted as well that aggressiveness against girls is socially or ethically disapproved. Furthermore, boys justii→ed

bullying and downplayed its importance. In contrast, girls expressed an empathetic understanding toward victims, while at the same time engaged in indirect (or concealed) forms of bullying that are more appropriate to their gender. Girls avoided defining these indirect forms of aggressive behavior as bullying, however. Overall, boys positioned themselves on the side of the aggressor, whereas girls positioned themselves on the side of the victim. Relevant research in Greece, regarding students' views on aggressive behavior, confirmed that both boys and girls associate violence with male identity, representing thus popular ideologies that are dominant in schools and society in general (Deliyanni-Kouimtzis & Sakka, 2005a). In the quantitative study on bullying conducted in Greek secondary education (Psalti & Constantinou, 2007), adolescent girls were also more sympathetic with the victims, whereas boys believed that victims deserve such aggressive behavior; furthermore, 20% of students, primarily boys, declared that they remain emotionally detached toward victimization. Overall, researchers agree that socialization practices within the family, as well as the Greek educational system, encourage the construction of hegemonic masculinities among boys, which are characterized by the exercise of power and aggression (Deliyanni-Kouimtzis & Sakka, 2005a; Frossi & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2007). In contrast, girls are expected to behave in ways which are more appropriate to their role and society's expectation in relation to what it means to be feminine inside the school, the family, and the workplace. For example, socialization practices within the family assign priority to girls' positive social behavior.

Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits 338

Athanasiades and Deliyanni-Kouimtzis toward others, to politeness and good

manners, as well as to academic achievement; boys, in contrast, are mostly advised to refrain from risky behaviors, to be hard working and tough, and to avoid the expression of feelings (Deliyianni-Kouimtzis & Sakka, 2005b).

Research conducted elsewhere has also described that elementary school children construct bullying as unproblematic, harmless, and justified (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003). In a study of a bullying among secondary school students in Spain, researchers found that differences between genders were attributed to boys' impulsive character, which led them to being more physically aggressive (Yubero & Navarro, 2006). Girls as much as boys considered physical aggression as more problematic than verbal or indirect aggression, and boys described physical aggression against girls as socially condemned. Based on similar results, Boulton and colleagues (2002) agreed that a number of adolescents may not share adult views about bullying behaviors, and probably this is the reason why so many students engage in bullying. On the contrary, we believe that the discursive strategies of justification, underestimation, and camouflage, aging used by our students reflect cultural representations, which help legitimize both boys' and girls' aggressive behavior, especially when this is considered typical for each gender. Concerning communication patterns with adults, the boys that participated in our study admitted that they do not disclose bullying to either teachers or parents, because doing that would be incompatible with their male identity, whereas girls implied that they are more revealing with parents and friends, with whom they retain close or intimate relationships. Neither gender seemed to desire their teachers' collaboration and support, as teachers were portrayed as indifferent toward bullying and ineffective in



their interventions. The strategy of silencing bullying and victimization, particularly on behalf of the boys/victims, supports relevant research results with respect to male identity construction (Cowie, 2000; Deliyanni-Kouimtzis & Sakka, 2005a; Phoenix et al., 2003) and renders bullying “invisible” within Greek schools. Furthermore, it has been found that the majority of Greek teachers disclaim the pedagogic dimension of their role, by assigning responsibility primarily to the family, by downgrading the impact of contextual factors, and by considering necessary the presence of other professionals within schools (i. e., psychologists or social workers) (Frossi & Deliyanni-Kouimtzis, 2007). Teachers assume responsibility only for the cognitive development of students, revealing thus their insecurity in dealing with any social—emotional issues or power relationships among them—a stance that is totally perceived by students. For example, the quantitative research verified that 25% of Greek students (primarily boys) do not reveal bullying or victimization, whereas 30% of them believe that teachers and parents have not tried to stop bullying at schools and that, despite their attempts, measures against bullying have not been effective (Psalti & Constantinou, 2007). Rigby and Bagshaw (2003) have also reported significant difficulties regarding the collaboration between teachers and students of secondary education to effectively address bullying. They found that 40% of students in Australia believe that teachers are not usually interested in taking any action to stop bullying, and a similar proportion of students (especially bullies and victims) questioned their teachers’ conflict-resolution skills. Apart from the small number of school psychologists working in the Greek public educational system, their role and

responsibilities are seriously undermined (Nikolopoulos, 2007). Therefore, initiatives for intervention as well as prevention measures against bullying are difficult to implement, considering the limited resources and the serious lack of appropriate professionals. Nevertheless, our results highlight the students' preference for peer-support services regarding bully—victim conflicts, instead of their parents' or teachers' involvement. According to Boulton (2005), friends are perceived as providers of social support for many secondary students, who are more willing to solicit help from friends regarding bullying and victimization than from teachers or siblings. Rigby (2005) has also reported that the students' attitudes toward victims as well as adolescents' social Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits The Experience of Bullying 339 behavior in Australian schools are more influenced by their peers than by their parents' or teachers' expectations. It has been documented, however, that effective antibullying interventions should employ a whole-school approach, which aims to reinforce an atmosphere of trust and safety among students, teachers, and parents (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). We strongly believe that teachers' education and consciousness raising with respect to bullying, gender issues, and "different-ness" have to be enhanced and supported, at least in Greece. Furthermore, parents' collaboration and their active involvement in schools are essential for the application of an integrated perspective against violence and bullying. Considering the qualitative nature of our study and the small number of students that participated, it is not possible to generalize our data, which are furthermore culturally specific. Moreover, data collection through focus group interviewing has inherent

limitations, such as consensus of opinion and marginalization of dissenting voices. Victims may have been hesitant to talk clearly because of fear of revenge, and bullies may have not been sincere to avoid social condemnation, even though the two roles were clearly identifiable within groups. Finally, data analysis following the interpretative phenomenological approach means that other interpretations of the results are also possible. In conclusion, we believe that future research should further address, using qualitative studies and interviews with students and teachers, the issue of bullying in secondary education. Additionally, given the group nature of bullying behaviors, peer-mediation processes as well as issues of power differentials between genders may be worth further investigation to reduce both direct and indirect aggression within schools.

**APPENDIX Focus Group Interview Protocol**

**Hypothetical scenarios of school bullying**

- In a school like yours, Kostas and his friends wait for Michael at the school entrance almost every day; they surround him, push him, and throw down his books and jacket. In a school like yours, Catherine spreads rumors and says nasty things to everybody about Dimitra. Many girls in the school make fun of Dimitra, who ends up isolated most of the time.

**Questions**

1. How would you describe (or name) what you have just heard? Prompts: Have you ever heard about bullying? What do you think bullying means?
2. Have you ever noticed such incidents at your school? Prompt: How often and where does bullying usually occur?
3. Why do you believe that some students bully others? Prompts: What are the reasons of bullying? What are the characteristics of bullies?
4. Why do you believe that some students become victims of bullying? Prompts: What are the reasons of victimization? What are the

characteristics of victims? 5. How do boys and girls engage in bullying?

Prompts: Are there any differences between boys and girls? If so why? 6. Do you think that teachers (and parents) are aware of bullying at your school?

Prompts: Have you ever spoken to teachers (and parents) about bullying?

Why not? What are their usual responses? Have they taken any measures? 7.

What would you like to do at your school in order to eliminate bullying?

Prompt: What are your ideas for prevention and interventions against

bullying? Psychology in the Schools DOI: 10. 1002/pits 340 Athanasiades and

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