

Ways to explain bullying: dimensional analysis of the conceptions held by adolescents

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Abstract *This study unveils the meaning attributed by students to bullying and contributes to the approach of student health. The objective was to identify the dimensions of the conceptions of students regarding bullying. A total of 55 students from 11 public schools participated by answering semi-structured interviews. Dimensional analysis was used to treat data and a matrix was constructed with the dimensions identified. The Grounded Theory was adopted as the methodological and theoretical framework. The adolescents were aware of the main dimensions of bullying but explained it descriptively and from individual perspectives. The following dimensions were identified: type, nature, examples, motivation and consequences. The type of violence was a dimension with greater explanatory power in relation to the remaining dimensions. Verbal violence and its different manifestations stood out. Aspects of the literature that define bullying were identified, indicating how the topic is diffused, its occurrence and how it is understood by students. The innovative nature of this study is its focus on the identification of the dimensions of bullying present in the narrative of Brazilian students. It is an approach that contributes to the organization of healthcare programs and interventions in different fields.*

Key words *School health, Violence, Bullying, Adolescent health, Qualitative research*

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Introduction

Bullying is understood as a problem in the peer relations characterized by the imbalance of power between the parties, by the intentionality and repetitiveness of aggressive acts¹. It can also be examined in relation to the type of aggression – physical, verbal or psychological – as well as the nature of its manifestations, regarding the behaviors, actions and methods adopted in the aggressions, such as hitting or name-calling, for example^{2,3}. Conceptually, bullying has been defined in most studies from the perspective of adults or researchers.

In Brazil this phenomenon is a reality for many students. The cross-national research project School Health Survey (PeNSE) conducted in 2012 with a sample of 109,104 students from throughout the country showed that 20.8% of the participants practiced some type of bullying, and the victims totaled 7.2%⁴. Compared with data from the first version of the study developed in 2009, the authors indicated that the historical series points to an increase in reports of bullying among Brazilian students in recent years. In 2009, the percentage of students who reported having suffered bullying was 5.4%^{4,5}.

All those involved in the episodes of bullying, whether as bully only, bullied only, both bully and bullied coincidentally (students who suffer but also practice bullying), or witnesses suffer the psychological and social consequences of the phenomenon throughout human development^{2,3}. Research has shown that school-age children and adolescents who suffer or witness bullying are more likely to develop mental suffering and psychosocial problems^{3,6}. In turn, aggressors may get involved in situations of violence or infractions^{6,7}. These data on the high prevalence of the phenomenon in different cultures and its characteristics demonstrate that the bullying is a problem of public health concern⁸⁻¹⁰.

This type of violence at school is the result of different social determinants. Studies have consistently indicated factors that may be related to bullying, and explain it. Family interactions and climate^{11,12}, issues of moral engagement^{13,14}, socioeconomic conditions¹⁵, health risk behaviors¹², and characteristics of group relations¹⁶ are some of the aspects associated with the phenomenon.

The literature also shows that bullying is a multidimensional, complex and dynamic experience whose dimensions are difficult to grasp^{2,17}. In this sense, prevention and intervention programs should consider the symbolic and con-

ceptual value that bullying has in the view of students^{3,18,19}. This level of approach requires the operationalization of qualitative studies that offer diverse options to identify variables that are significant for the phenomenon, such as motivations, causes, implicit situations such as social exclusion, prejudice and fear, as well as specific aspects of group relationships among students that are less visible in large-scale investigations. Furthermore, an additional and contextual contribution of studies in this perspective is the discovery of specificities of the forms and conceptualizations of bullying in Brazil based on the students' own understanding, and not only on the definitions and assumptions of literature.

For example, a qualitative study focusing on the social representations that adolescents have of school violence revealed the typical manifestations of the phenomenon and its psychosocial impacts on those involved¹⁷. In the view of the participants of this study, bullying is a multifaceted phenomenon and expression of different types of violence in the school environment¹⁷. Another research with qualitative design conducted with adolescents revealed that bullying is, first of all, a phenomenon discursively organized and related to different social contexts, including the family context²⁰.

This type of approach broadens the view of the phenomenon. However, the focus of most studies emphasizes other facets of the phenomenon, such as prevalence²¹ and related factors²², or from the perspective of other protagonists of the school context^{6,8}. Little attention is paid to the narrative elements of students about bullying^{3,20}.

Thus, the proposed dimensional analysis allows the construction or reconstruction of knowledge about a given social phenomenon, with the purpose of explaining and understanding it from the concrete problem and its protagonists. It is a way of understanding processes and foreseeing how to intervene considering their different dimensions²³. A dimension is a descriptive and decomposed concept of the object under analysis that interacts with other dimensions, revealing the context and the strongest elements used by a group to explain a given phenomenon²⁴. Therefore, this work adopted the Grounded Theory as a methodological and theoretical reference based on a constructivist stance^{3,23,24}. This constructivist stance assumes the preservation of the social complexity of the phenomena analyzed during the research process, encouraging the development of new understandings and theoretical interpretations^{3,23,24}.

In this sense, this study seeks the identification of factors that compose or justify bullying among students, being an important starting point for care actions in different areas such as education and health. The objective was to know the conceptual dimensions of bullying in the view of students of a Brazilian city, offering an interpretative representation of the phenomenon studied.

Method

Participants

This study presents qualitative elements of a research with a mixed design. All students from 11 schools ($N = 2,354$), from the 6th grade of elementary school through the 3rd grade of high school, who were present at the dates of data collection in 2014, answered scales on involvement in situations of bullying (Victimization and Peer Aggression Scale - VPAS)²⁵ and quality of family interactions (Family Interaction Quality Scale - FIQS)²⁶. The VPAS comprises 18 statements describing specific aggressive behaviors that may occur in the school and allows the identification of bullies and bullied²⁵. The FIQS is composed of 40 questions and allows the evaluation of nine dimensions of family interaction (involvement, rules and monitoring, positive communication, negative communication, positive conjugal climate, negative conjugal climate, parental model, corporal punishment, and children's feelings) through the children's report²⁶. Students were randomly selected from the sampling universe (N) of respondents of these scales to participate in the qualitative stage of the research ($n = 55$), from which the present analysis takes place. All the students who were randomly chosen accepted to participate in the study.

At this stage, the selection of participants was guided by the sampling strategy of maximum variation²³, which allows the documentation of the greatest possible amount of information, number of experiences, dimensions and properties of the investigated phenomenon and context. This strategy allowed the definition of the total number of participants necessary to guarantee a good representativeness of the sampling universe (N). Thus, 55 students (54.5% boys, mean age $M = 15$ years, $SD = 2$ years - standard deviation) were randomly selected from 11 public and urban schools of a medium-sized municipality in the countryside of the state of Minas Gerais.

The selection of students obeyed the following inclusion criteria: being enrolled in one of the chosen schools, regularly attending classes, having answered the other two scales in the study, and being present in the class on the day of data collection. In order to protect the identity of the participants, they will henceforth be identified by a code composed of the letter A followed by a number assigned to each adolescent, and by the letter S followed by a number corresponding to the school of origin (Adolescent 1, School 1 = A1S1; Adolescent 2, School 1 = A2S1, and so on).

Data collection

Data collection took place in 2014 through individual and script-guided semi-structured interviews. Examples of questions: What is bullying in your opinion? Have you ever been threatened, humiliated, excluded or beaten in school? What did they do to you? Have you ever threatened, mistreated, humiliated, excluded, or beaten another classmate in school? What did you do? Have you ever witnessed any of your colleagues being threatened, mistreated, humiliated, excluded or beaten at school? What did you do? Follow-up questions were also used (How so? Could you tell me more about it? What do you mean? Could you give me examples?) to clarify or illustrate and deepen the answers. The mean time of each interview was 12 minutes, ranging from 6 to 26 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the students' schools, in private rooms, without the presence of teachers or other students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed according to the dimensional analysis method, which includes three main steps: sizing, differentiating and integrating of elements^{3,24}. The first step of this method consists in a codification by means of the selection of words, phrases or accounts that indicate outstanding dimensions in the transcribed texts and its main themes. This design allows the creation of synopses describing the signification attributed by the participants to the social phenomenon. The analytical questions that guided this moment of the study were: What information is present in the data? How do participants explain bullying? What do the data convey? Then, general and divergent concepts in the narratives were explored and compared, and finally, aspects of the literature were integrated to interpret and

indicate the dimensions with greater explanatory power for the study group or its alternative perspectives^{3,24}. A matrix with the identified dimensions was created on the basis of this picture.

Ethical issues

Ethical precepts were observed in all phases of the study, as well as the guidelines of Resolution 466/2012²⁷. The research project was submitted and approved by a research ethics committee.

Results

Most of the study participants reported involvement in bullying only as witnesses or observers (44%, $n = 24$). Victims accounted for 29% ($n = 16$) of the participants, and the aggressor victims for 5% ($n = 3$). Only 9% of the participants declared themselves to be aggressors ($n = 5$), corresponding to three boys and two girls. Bullied only ($n = 10$), bullies and bullied ($n = 4$), and bullies only ($n = 4$) also reported having witnessed bullying at school. On the other hand, 13% of the students ($n = 7$) did not report any type of involvement in bullying situations. The experiences of the participants performing these roles are exemplified in Chart 1 through excerpts from the interviews.

In cases of bullying, many of the students reported not intervening in the situation to avoid being attacked either as they did not see possibilities for solving the problem, because they were alone, did not know the victims, or because the victims had characteristics that, in their opinion, justified the aggressions. Students who have adopted some behavior of intervening to defend the bullied did so by putting themselves in the other's shoes because they found the use of violence to be wrong, or because they were colleagues of the victims or because they had cases in the family of people who had suffered prejudice or discrimination.

In the narratives of the adolescents, violence is recognized as suffering from different sorts, but verbal aggression stands out, with a predominance of pejorative names and offenses over the victim's characteristics. Psychological violence is manifested in situations of shunning from the peer group, threats of aggression, and in the establishment of fear as a strong element of social relations. No situations of theft of peer belongings or sexual assaults were mentioned.

From the perspective of the bullies, physical violence and the intentional character of the ag-

gressions were more explicit. In addition, aspects such as satisfaction in causing pain and suffering to the victim were mentioned without there being an apparent justification or motivation. Aspects related to the imbalance of power between the parties in bullying situations were also identified.

The analysis of the dimensions related to bullying in the narratives of the adolescents revealed that the type of violence is the central perspective to define and explain the phenomenon in relation to the other dimensions identified (Figure 1). All other verified dimensions were listed in the matrix with respective nature (how they describe bullying - offering it as a response a behavior, an action or a method adopted in the aggressions), examples, motivation and consequences.

As it was observed, violence type was the dimension with the greatest explanatory power for bullying among participants, with emphasis on verbal violence, followed by psychological and physical violence. The nature or expression of aggressions - direct or indirect - as well as the examples provided by the adolescents were the most outstanding dimensions and the ones closer to the central perspective. Chart 2 presents examples of excerpts from the interviews related to the identified conceptual dimensions.

Bullying is mainly defined as verbal aggression. In the narratives, name-calling, imposition of pejorative names, and verbal abuses were the strongest conceptions quoted to explain the phenomenon. This is a direct manifestation of bullying in everyday school life; however, indirect forms such as shunning and oppression were also identified. It is notable that episodes of physical aggression were little mentioned, summarized to the act of "hitting", for example. In this context, there is also an extension of the concept when adolescents explicitly refer to situations of prejudice and discrimination.

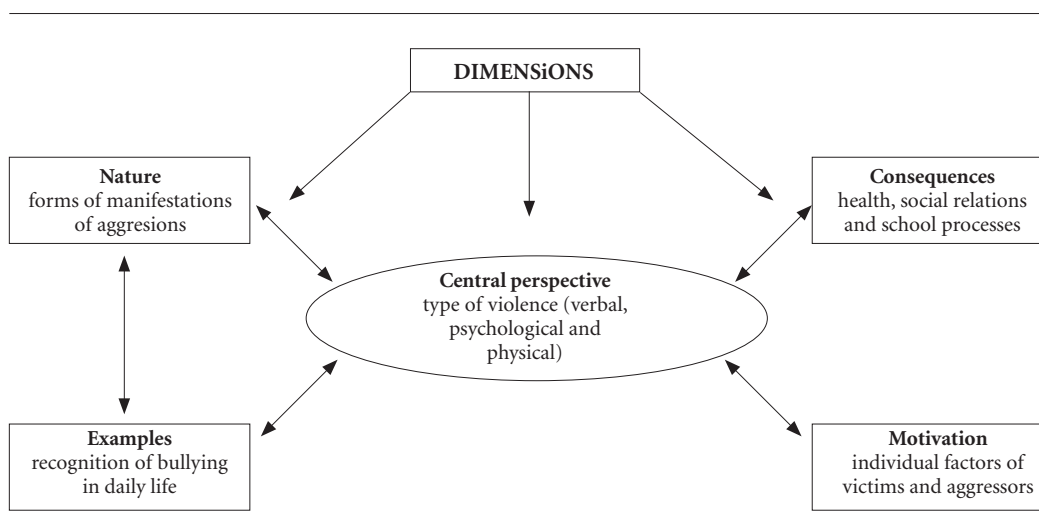
Different justifications were found in the dimension related to the motivations for the practice of bullying as attributed by the students, regardless of the role played. In short, envy, intolerance to diversity, subjective issues of aggressors, characteristics of the victims that differ from the peer group, as well as the desire to cause suffering to the victim are some possible motivations for the acts of bullying. The actions and the way the interactions occur seem to be driven by these specific conditions.

As a result of this process and its dimensions, the consequences of bullying for those involved is an approach that can also guide actions and intervention programs. In this sense, it is observed

Chart 1. Excerpts of interviews according to the type of involvement in bullying situations. Ribeirão Preto, 2015.

Type of involvement	Examples in the study
Witnesses	<p><i>They cursed a girl, they kept calling names. There was a kid who even beat her. I went and stayed between them... [Because] I do not think that's right, I do not think it's right to hit someone, let alone a woman. It does not matter who (A3S1).</i></p> <p><i>A boy, I do not know what it was ... If he did not dress well, I do not know if the people did not like him, by the way he was, I think, and they beat him (A29S7).</i></p> <p><i>I did not do anything because I did not have much access to that person. And the person, too, was kind of outsider. If they were friends of mine who were shunning the person I would tell them not to do that with the person (A49S11).</i></p>
Bullied only	<p><i>[The school] is a little annoying, because most of the time there are a lot of people who keep cursing, cursing me, making fun of me, but I do not even care. [Talking] About my hair. They keep calling me names in the classroom (A6S2).</i></p> <p><i>I was fat and they would make a lot of jokes about me: "he's fat, whatever...?" [...] There was a June party, I was without a partner and the teacher took me from room to room to get a partner [...] It ended up that I did not even dance (A42S10).</i></p> <p><i>Because I was afraid no one would like me (A23S6).</i></p>
Bullied and bully	<p><i>So I've hit a boy once. Because he was the one who had started [...] He began to hit me, I don't remember why, then I retaliated, instead of going to the office [...] He teased me and I did not like it, I got angry and I ended up losing my mind (A8S3).</i></p>
Bully only	<p><i>Just to pick on [...]. In the case of A. [the other student], it was really for no specific reason, we would pick on her. Then she just retaliated and we hit her. [...] I do not know why, but it was good and bad. Because, it was good to see her crying, because she was irritating, but it was bad to see her crying, I felt pity (A4S2).</i></p> <p><i>To attack, no, I never got involved in a fight at school [...] But, picking on someone, to humiliate, yeas, I've already done that. [...]It's like, the guy does not comb his hair, so you call it that 'train' all the time, all day long, until he gets crazy in the head. [...] There the person, I don't know, it's like you enter his mind, and he goes crazy, he cries... I've already done that, make the person cry. At the time I thought it was funny, everyone was laughing (A9S3).</i></p>

Source: Interviews with adolescents.

**Figure 1.** Matrix of the dimensions of conceptions of bullying among students. Ribeirão Preto, 2015.

Source: Interviews with adolescents.

Chart 2. Excerpts of the interviews that exemplify the conceptual dimensions identified in the study. Ribeirão Preto, 2015.

Dimension	Examples in the study
Type of violence	<p><i>It is name-calling, picking on people's defects, hitting (A6S2).</i></p> <p><i>It is the person who is rejected by friends. Lowered to the other colleagues to feel they are a bit superior (A1S1).</i></p> <p><i>It is something that the person has never troubled anyone[...], then someone comes and starts to offend her, horribly, with pejorative names[...]. It's repetitive. It happens every day (A13S5).</i></p> <p><i>It is disrespecting a person for the simple fact that he is different from you and others. Because he has a different style, or he thinks differently, I will shun him. Mistreat the person because she is not like us (A46S10).</i></p> <p><i>When we begin to subdue, oppress, someone who has the right to express himself in society. To shun the person. To oppress [...] (A52S11).</i></p>
Nature	<p><i>Bullying is you saying something racist to the guy. To curse, to call him names that he doesn't like [...]. To offend is bullying (A8S3).</i></p>
Examples	<p><i>It's like, people call me Zacharias, I'm not going to lie, I don't like it. Even though it's a joke. In general, it's to go there call a person with names, mistreat her, and she shows that she doesn't like what you've done and you insist (A7S3).</i></p> <p><i>I remember that once I went to the vacation colony of the complex [school], and there were only lean girls, those things. [...] They wanted to beat me because they wanted to steal the teacher's cell phone and I said I was not going to, so they said, 'Ah, you're a coward, chubby' (A32S9).</i></p>
Motivation	<p><i>When the person doesn't like the person who is black, people do not accept when a woman likes another woman, men with men (A27S7).</i></p> <p><i>Students who feel superior to others come together to mistreat someone who they find to be inferior (A30S7).</i></p> <p><i>An offense, disrespect. An anger that the person has and casts in the other person. This person who is a bully, what is it that is going on in her home, in her life? (A45S10).</i></p> <p><i>A person who feels good about mistreating the other, hurting, making him to suffer, really [...] (A51S11).</i></p>
Consequences	<p><i>[Bullying is] Just sadness. [...] It is very sad that you be a victim of bullying and in a while you meet the person and not befriend her (A55S11).</i></p> <p><i>They are offenses to the colleague or friend, that cause depression, it may even lead to suicide (A3S1).</i></p> <p><i>Bullying is a very bad thing. The colleague may feel sad, feel hurt, and even give in to depression (A26S6).</i></p> <p><i>The person feels like mutilating herself; that person starts to want to do that (A13S5).</i></p> <p><i>I did not come back there [school activity]. [...] Because I was afraid that they would hit me or make me do other things [...] (A32S9).</i></p> <p><i>I think the person who is a bully also needs help (A45S10).</i></p>

Source: Interviews with adolescents.

that the consequences and impacts of bullying in the view of students are well defined and relate to feelings of impotence, dissatisfaction, fear and low self-esteem.

Discussion

One objective of this study was to know the narratives of adolescents about experiences and situations of bullying in order to access the conceptual dimensions of this social phenomenon from the point of view of students themselves. This perspective favored the emergence of subjective

and spontaneous answers about the complexity that surrounds bullying from the perspective of the students and that can help researchers and educators to broaden their conceptualization. First, students involved in episodes of the phenomenon and those who did not report any type of participation were represented. In this topic, we highlight the high number of students who had already witnessed some sort of bullying and the prevalence of verbal aggression in the definition of the phenomenon. Subsequently, the dimensional analysis was used to identify the dimensions and significations of bullying in the students' narratives. The dimension that typifies violence was the most used to explain the phenomenon.

A first finding of the study is that bullying is a phenomenon that encompasses other actors and not only the aggressor/victim dyad¹⁶. Witnesses are important characters in violence episodes, as they may assume behaviors to defend the victims, as well as to become an accomplice or reinforce the aggressors' behavior^{16,28}. Students with this type of involvement in situations of bullying tend to act in defense of the victim based on previous personal experiences as victims, solidarity or observation to rules of coexistence. However, the peer group exerts a strong influence in this segment, being determinant for the actions of defense or apathy in the face of situations of violence^{16,28}.

In the case of victims, there was a prevalence of reports of verbal violence. This can be explained by the stage of development of the participants; aggressions tend to be more veiled or difficult to identify during the adolescence^{2,14}. In this case, verbal violence, which is also a direct manifestation, is confused with games typical of the age^{6,29}. However, as the participants report, the severity of this type of bullying is as intense as physical aggression, also causing harm to the victim, as other studies have indicated^{3,21}.

On the other hand, physical aggression was emphasized by bullies, suggesting that verbal forms of violence are not seen as bullying³⁰. In this group, content that the literature presents as essential for conceptualizing bullying, related to the intentionality of actions and the symbolic imbalance of power among peers¹, was also mentioned. These understandings are consistent with the view of bullying, linked to reasons regarding the positions of dominance adopted by the bullies among their peers. The notion of intentionality, either manifested or latent, refers to the aggressor's conscious desire to practice a cer-

tain behavior that is recognized as morally and socially wrong.

Repeatability of the actions, another aspect used in the literature to define and characterize bullying, however, appeared explicitly in only one account. Meanwhile, a recent survey on the development of research and approach on the phenomenon clarified that the criterion of repetition may not be absolutely necessary to characterize bullying¹. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that the qualitative perspective adopted in the present article is characterized by seeking to understand what students conceive and how they explain bullying. It is an approach that provides us the "look" of the participants regarding this form of violence and not the search for confirmation or refutation of literature, as a rule. In this sense, for a student, a single experience of violence can be as remarkable, or even more remarkable, than repeated episodes. This is a fact that the student may qualify as bullying and is currently considered valid by specialized literature¹. It should be pointed out, however, that even considering these questions, the follow-up questions used during interviews allowed us to exclude occasional violence or other situations that were not characterized as bullying. This control allowed only bullying situations to be included and analyzed in the study.

On the whole, the results revealed a convergence in the way bullying is explained by students and the literature, contemplating the proposed criteria to characterize it¹. In addition, regarding the conceptual dimension with greater explanatory power for bullying, among the participants, it was noticed that this refers to the more widespread concept of the phenomenon: bullying is a type of violence. From the social point of view, it is exclusively a type of violence related to the decision-making processes of the aggressors and the characteristics of the victim^{1,6}. The multiple factors and their different levels of manifestation are measured from this widely diffused definition^{1,16,19}.

However, this dimension of conception alone does not reflect the complexity of bullying. For example, the understanding of the phenomenon may be circumscribed to it, ignoring other issues inherent to the phenomenon, as its causes and consequences. Moreover, this typification of episodes of violence is more associated with individual aspects that often reject contextual variables^{2,6}. In this perspective, the construction of a culture of non-violence is associated with a broad understanding of the phenomenon. Previ-

ous studies have suggested that the level of perception, knowledge and beliefs about bullying among school-age youth, teachers and the school community significantly affect the prevalence rates of the phenomenon^{3,8,18,19}.

In the same direction, the dimensions that are most related to the central perspective, related to the manifestations of the phenomenon and exemplifications, reflect the real experience of the daily life, or are hypothesized as the best resource to explain how adolescents interpret bullying. This dimension of the direct or indirect nature of the aggressions explicitly indicates how a bullying situation can be recognized, meanwhile tends to reflect a common confusion between jokes and violence. On the other hand, the few mentions of physical aggression indicate that this type of behavior is not, in general, directly related to bullying^{17,30}. These results reveal the process of naturalization of violence in schools, which is considered as a form of game, as well as the importance of raising awareness among students and the school community about the problem³¹.

At the same time, depending on the nature, acts of violence may indicate that there will be some kind of intervention. For example, as there is a frequent mention of verbal expressions of violence, thus counseling and professional help are used to counteract the situations or help the victims^{6,28}.

In the data set also revealed a tendency to expand the concept of bullying insofar as the adolescents express their concerns with tolerance to inequality and against different forms of discrimination. This positivity has its foundation in the incorporation of broad aspects such as the recognition of human rights and the promotion of diversity as themes related to violence. This is true specifically in the case of macro-structural plots present in the different manifestations of violence in society and which are responsible for high morbidity and mortality rates and interfere in the quality of life of children and adolescents, in the case of violence experienced in the school environment⁹.

Regarding the motivations that lead to bullying, the participants indicated that the aggressors present personal reasons to act aggressively or act according to the characteristics of the victims, considered negative. This approach indicates the emotional use of force as an interactive resource between peers^{3,32}. Bullying has also been identified as a matter of morality, insofar as it involves the intention to cause harm to others and justifications based on the characteristics of the

victims, for example¹³. These justifications indicate components of the passivity of the bullied, as blamed for the aggressions by having their characteristics, and not actively, when victimized by being unpleasant, unfriendly or bad with colleagues¹³.

It is important to note that the participants identified individual factors as reasons for victimization, such as physical or sexual characteristics that are different or deviant from social standards. Being ugly, fat, wearing strange clothes, having an ethnic origin, or sexual orientation different from hegemonic patterns were some of the factors mentioned. What these factors seem to have in common is that they are psychosocial processes and are poorly addressed in intervention programs^{3,26,31}. In this sense, by offering a broader approach to the concept of bullying, with aspects of valorization of human rights and tolerance of differences, one can think of actions aimed at the development of assertive behaviors or social skills necessary to make friends, and accept and be accepted by the peer group, for example^{3,9,19}.

As for the real impact of bullying, research^{3,6,7,14} has indicated that bullying is a problem that affects the whole school community. Aggressors can be repeatedly rejected by the peer group and are at greater risk to develop behavioral problems during adolescence and maladjustment in adulthood. As demonstrated in this study, victims may have problems to relate with others, and internalize problems related to anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Likewise, problems in the teaching-learning process, failure and school drop-out are other consequences of the processes of violent peer relationships.

In this sense, the narratives of the youth provided some important insights on the issues that must be taken into account while planning intervention programs and confronting bullying. The multidimensionality and complexity explain the importance of intersectoral strategies capable of improving individual social interaction skills, the adoption of healthy living habits, means of solving conflicts, and the approach to human rights and anti-prejudice content.

Strategies aimed at good social interaction and encouragement to friend-making, solidarity, inclusion and social acceptance can be included in the classroom, as well as clarifications about the different forms that the phenomenon can assume in everyday life, as for example, verbal or indirect violence. This would open channels for the topic to be considered and to the situations

of violence to be reported to adults⁶. In another direction, as a social problem, the resolution of the matter requires an approach to socially diffused values and moral issues. Creating positive climates in the schools and fighting violent acts and behaviors could counteract the culture of violence^{3,13}. In practical terms, schools should establish rules against bullying, enable staff to detect and deal with bullying during intervals, and offer playful activities (games, structured activities, drama techniques, etc.) for these moments, to mediate conflicts between students.

In the area of school health, one can think of actions focused on health promotion and education with cross-sectional themes (violence, conflict resolution, and tolerance to diversity, for example)^{8,19}. Furthermore, in Brazil, the “Care Line for comprehensive health care for children, adolescents and their families in situations of violence” of the Ministry of Health advises the performance of primary health care teams in schools. This work should be aimed at identifying the problem, i.e. risk behaviors and symptoms (hematomas, bruises and scratches without reason or convincing explanation, constant sadness, loss of appetite, irritability, headaches, stomach ache, and constant appearance of canker sores, among others), counseling families, and contributing to the implementation of intervention and prevention programs to combat bullying¹⁰. In this sense, health teams can, for example, propose informative actions in schools to explain what bullying and its consequences are, besides helping to include families in the recognition and coping of the issue through home visits.

Finally, there were a small number of students without any involvement with bullying. This data points two urgent aspects. First, it indicates that violence has become naturalized and incorporated into the daily lives of school-age youth. In fact, it is understood as a justifiable and effective strategy to solve conflicts and cope with problematic situations. Therefore, the recognition of bullying as a negative phenomenon by the majority of students has not contributed to the reduction of episodes of violence in schools. There is a greater maturity in the view of bullying and a greater dissemination of the phenomenon, but these aspects have not been enough to eliminate or to reduce its manifestations.

Final considerations

With a constructivist stance, this study demonstrated that adolescents know the main conceptual dimensions of bullying, but they explain it in a descriptive way and based on individual issues. In their view, bullying can be explained mainly by the type of violence practiced, as well as by their forms of manifestation in everyday life. It is noteworthy that the bullied mentioned more frequently verbal violence, while the bullies emphasized violence in their narratives. The participants also did not underestimate the motivations for the practice of bullying and its consequences for the health, development and the teaching-learning process of all those involved. The original contribution of this study is the construction of an interpretative, comprehensive and explanatory representation of the investigated phenomenon from the perspective of students. It is essential to discuss their experiences, i.e. how they define bullying and what they say about it, for the organization of care and effective intervention programs, broadening the technical logics of literature or of adults.

Meanwhile, the presented data should be examined bearing in mind three main limitations of the study. First, this was a cross-sectional study; thus inferences about causal links related to bullying and the dimensions analyzed are not possible. Second, although qualitative data provide the senses and meanings of bullying attributed by adolescents, the conclusions drawn from them should be considered contextual and temporary. Finally, the collection of quantitative data prior to the qualitative interviews may have sensitized the students to some extent towards the subject studied. Additional research may support the concepts discussed here, expand the reflections on the students’ experiences in bullying situations and how they interpret it, investigating the conceptual dimensions present in different groups and samples, with different designs and methodological techniques.

We conclude that the analysis of conceptual dimensions is useful to describe, understand and intervene in bullying among school-age youth in the specific Brazilian reality. In addition, the use of qualitative methods and the approach of the adolescents’ narratives about bullying are benefi-

cial for they complement the existing knowledge and point to paths for intervention as indicated by the students themselves. As noted, this is a complex problem whose priorities must take into account its main protagonists and what they say about the issue.

Collaborations

WA Oliveira coordinated the working group, worked on the design, analysis and interpretation of the data, and drafted the main and the final text. JL Silva, IF Braga and C Romualdo participated in the systematization and analysis of the data and critical review of the manuscript. SCS Caravita guided the development of the research, contributed to the final review and approval of the manuscript. MAI Silva guided the design and development of the research, contributed to the analysis of the data and revised and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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