

Unseen Scars: The Intersection of School Bullying, Individualism, and Collectivism

Zilu Li^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, 000000, China*

a. zilu1214.li@connect.polyu.hk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Violence in schools occurs in both collectivist and individualist societies. This paper examined bullying in educational settings and the connection to individualism and collectivism. It reported how these concepts influence bullying behaviors. Data from the OECD indicated that around 23% of students in these countries face bullying several times a month. The main focus was on the impact of bullying on students' mental health, social relationships, and academic performance. The paper also explored the differences in bullying behaviors in cultures prioritizing group values (collectivism) versus individual values (individualism). In individualistic societies, bullied students might feel more isolated, while in collectivist societies, bullying might be less visible as individuals might not discuss their struggles in public. This study aimed to provide a clearer understanding of school bullying by considering both personal experiences and the wider cultural context. The findings were expected to contribute significantly to developing more effective anti-bullying strategies that consider both individual and group perspectives.

Keywords: school bullying, collectivism, individualism, culture

1. Introduction

Bullying emerges as the most common and enduring problem within educational settings [1]. Many studies have shown that bullying behaviors have increased tremendously throughout the past decades and are constantly escalating in the present. According to the statistics on Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), PISA 2018 database, 23% of students across the OECD countries highlighted that they are being bullied at least a few times a month [2]. School bullying is a severe problem that will directly impact students' mental well-being and holistic welfare. Previous studies have shown that there is a significant correlation between bullying and multifaceted consequences spanning physical, mental, social, and academic domains [3]. Moreover, Some researchers also found that adolescents who have ever experienced bullying have difficulties in social relationships and predict to have more mental health problems if they have a higher frequency of victimization [4].

1.1. School Bullying

The definition of school bullying lacks strict confines, stemming from the broader concept of "bullying". Bullying refers to using force, coercion, or threats to abuse, aggressively dominate, or intimidate [5]. A recent study highlights its essence as physical or verbal violence on a student who is in a power imbalance relationship [6]. Most bullying occurs within school settings, which is a form of violence that involves students as participants.

In terms of form, bullying is divided into instrumental and relational violence. Instrumental violence constitutes physical behavioral aggression, whereas relational violence aims to inflict emotional harm via non-physical means like rumors or social isolation. Gender dynamics play a role wherein boys tend toward physical assault, while girls are more inclined toward psychological aggression [7].

Research has shown that the prevalence of school bullying varies considerably across countries. The Programme for International Student Assessment has delineated the frequency of occurrences of school bullying among students in 75 participating countries and economies [2]. Countries with the highest proportions of students frequently subjected to bullying, in descending order, include the Philippines (64.9%), Brunei Darussalam (50.1%), and the Dominican Republic (43.9%). Conversely, the three countries with the lowest proportions of students frequently experiencing bullying are South Korea (9.4%), followed by the Netherlands (12.2%), and Taipei, China (13.3%). Statistics also reveal that, within OECD countries, an average of 22.7% of students report experiencing bullying at least several times per month. Notably, non-OECD countries exhibit markedly higher prevalence rates of school bullying in contrast to OECD countries. Furthermore, following a comprehensive survey of 96 countries and regions, the Global School Health Survey (GSHS) identified regions characterized by high prevalence rates of campus bullying, notably Sub-Saharan Africa (48.2%), North Africa (42.7%), and the Middle East (41.1%). Conversely, regions with the lowest rates were Central America (22.8%), the Caribbean (25%), and Europe (25%). Examining the incidence of bullying over the preceding month, regions within Sub-Saharan Africa exhibited the highest rate of students experiencing bullying for six days or more (11.3%), while Central America reported the lowest incidence at 4.1% [8].

1.2. Collectivism-Individualism Dimension

The factors contributing to school bullying can be diverse and complex, and the interplay between these factors and cultural differences adds another layer of complexity. Hofstede advanced four primary dimensions to delineate cultural differences among countries [9]. Presently, the majority of research on school bullying is predominantly grounded in the collectivism-individualism dimension.

In the context of this paper, it is important to define the concepts of collectivism and individualism as conceptualized by Hofstede. Collectivism refers to a cultural orientation in which individuals prioritize group goals over personal goals, emphasizing harmony, cohesion, and interdependence within social units such as families, schools, and communities [10,11]. In a collectivist society, individuals perceive themselves as integral parts of a larger whole, and societal norms prioritize the group's well-being over individual aspirations. Conversely, individualism reflects a cultural orientation characterized by an emphasis on personal goals, autonomy, and individual achievements. In an individualistic society, individuals focus more on personal rights, self-expression, and the pursuit of individual success [11]. People in these cultures tend to emphasize individual independence and initiative. Western countries exhibit high scores on the individualism dimension, with the highest rankings attributed to countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. On the other hand, many Asian countries get lower scores on the individualism dimension such as China, Pakistan, and Indonesia, which means that these countries tend to have collectivist values.

These cultural dimensions largely influence the emergence of bullying behavior in the school context. So understanding the differences between collectivism and individualism is important for explaining the differences and similarities of bullying behaviors in different cultural settings.

2. Impact of School Bullying on Collectivist and Individualist Cultures

Within collectivist and individualist cultures, school bullying exhibits a range of unique features. Collectivist cultures include a heightened emphasis on conformity to group norms, the collective nature of bullying behavior, and the profound influence of peer pressure and social dynamics [12]. In individualist cultures, school bullying is more focused on student's pursuit of personal identity and independence, which can lead to different ways of expressing power. So bullying behaviors in these societies are more assertive, direct, and overt [11]. The concept of speaking up for oneself is highly valued, but may lead to more aggressive behaviors.

An empirical study of bullying victimisation in China and England investigated similarities and differences in bullying/victimization, involvement in bullying, and attitudes toward bullying among 9,185 students from primary and secondary schools [10]. The study measured in detail how age and gender differences manifested themselves in different forms of bullying. The authors listed three forms of bullying, verbal bullying, physical bullying and relational bullying. The study aimed to investigate the prevalence and attitudinal differences that would emerge between the three forms of bullying and age/gender factors in a cross-cultural context. The results of the study showed that primary school students in China and England were more likely to be involved in all forms of bullying than secondary school students; boys were more likely to be involved in bullying and being bullied than girls; and verbal aggression was the most prevalent form of bullying behavior. In addition, the study showed that primary school students and girls in China had more positive attitudes towards bullying than those in England.

Research has analyzed bullying in China and England at multiple levels, mainly attributing the cause of these phenomena to cultural differences. Because China has a higher collectivist tendency than England, which is more individualistic, China places more emphasis on social norms in the educational environment in which children are raised. The value is a direct result of the fact that children in China to restrain their reckless and aggressive behavior and to maintain positive and friendly relationships. On the contrary, England's values encourage children to be bold and express their true will. In a way, these two different values can be used as a predictor of the prevalence of the presence of bullying in the region.

The study does make many conclusions in discussing collectivist and individualist bullying victimisation. However the sample size from England was much smaller and the geographical area chosen for the sample was much narrower, making it difficult to have high external validity. Furthermore, the study points to a direction of researching collectivist and individualist bullying in that students with lower levels of justification for bullying behavior are more likely to be collectivist, such as Japanese. Finally, one of the contributions of the study was a repeated measure of previous research that boys are more likely to be involved in physical bullying and girls are more likely to be involved in relationships. The authors conclude that this statement is not absolute and needs to be discussed further for other countries, as research suggests that boys in China will engage in more relational bullying than girls.

Another study concluded that bullying across cultural values was significantly correlated on the individualism-collectivism dimension [13]. The study investigated the relationship between bullying prevalence and individualism-collectivism in 75 countries using data from Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, Global School Health Survey (GSHS), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The study also made further predictions about the proportion of relational bullies, bullies and

victims. The aim of the study was to uncover more evidence to test the correlation between individualism-collectivism and bullying in different countries. The results of the study showed that countries with high individualism-collectivism scores had lower victimization. And, the percentage of relationship bullying in countries with high individualism-collectivism scores is not certain and it is difficult to go for a consistent conclusion. In addition, the results show that in individualistic countries there is a lower percentage of both bullies and victims.

The authors' explanation for these findings is that differences in point in time cause collectivist societies to have high levels of bullying behavior. For example, there was only one survey of bullies in 1994 and 1998, and significantly more surveys in the following decade or so. In addition, another explanation offered by the authors is the apparently substantial increase in regulatory frameworks and resources, examples include the creation of bills against bullying, school interventions against bullying, and more resources for teachers.

In conclusion, the study analyzed individualistic and collectivistic bullying in different countries clearly through a large sample and data. Bullying would be more likely to occur in a collectivist state rather than an individualist state, which is clearly the opposite of the findings of the first empirical study. This finding reveals the complexity and variability of bullying behavior in cross-cultural contexts. Although there was enough data, it all came from students' self-reports and therefore the data was highly subjective, which requires more objective data to be collected in future studies.

3. Comparing School Bullying Phenomena in Collectivist and Individualist Cultures

Collectivist and individualist cultures represent two poles on the cultural spectrum, each shaping the behaviors, norms, and values of its members in unique ways. The distinctions in these cultural values profoundly influence the dynamics of school bullying.

3.1. The Differences of School Bullying

School bullying exhibits itself diversely, haped by the cultural shapes within which it emerges. Collectivist cultures tend to witness relational and verbal abuse, driven by the important to maintain group norms and making use of social exclusion as a way of punishment. Conversely, individualist cultures typically emerges more overt bullying behaviors, including direct physical aggression. Individual supremacy and assertion of individual power take precedence in these societies [14]. This dichotomy not only just reflecting differing social constructs but also meaning distinct effects for the victims' experiences and recovery in different social structures.

3.1.1. The Differences in Types

The characteristics of bullying in school settings are various, which is related to the culture widespread in a given society. In collectivist societies, bullying usually includes subtle ways such as verbal insults and social exclusion—bullies wield the weaponry of aggression to weaken their quarry. Verbal bullying may include spreading rumors and claiming upsetting points, strategically ruin a peer's reputation. Relational aggression aims to damage social networks, isolating victims by braking their social bonds—a penalty for student who is not fitting in. Physical bullying is not common in schools in collectivist societies because it contradicts the emphasis on social harmony in collectivist cultures. However, school bullying in individualist societies is richer in type. Interpersonal assaults are not limited to the verbal and relational but extend to the physical aggression, as aggressors assert their dominance in school or class [15]. Verbal bullying also occurs because it is driven by personal prestige, by attacking the self-worth of peers, causing them to doubt their self-identity [16]. Studying how these verbal attacks differ between individualist and collectivist cultures requires more academic investigation [17].

Considering cyberbullying, the latest issue in this field, it transcends borders and cultures. As the Internet becomes a ubiquitous reality, this modern problem reaches everywhere with its cloak of anonymity, making traditional bullying tactics more widespread. There are notable differences in how people report bullying [18]. Victims within collectivist cultures may suffer in silence due to societal pressure to maintain the facade of tranquility. On the other hand, individualist victims are comparatively forthright, driven by the cultural push to defend their rights and invoke support.

3.1.2. The Differences in Reporting

Within the different cultural backgrounds, the act of reporting school bullying is profoundly influenced by the prevailing spirit of collectivism or individualism. In a collectivist context, the group's needs are always stronger than the individual's, so reporting bullying becomes complicated. Victims keep silent to maintain social balance because they feel pressured and do not want to disrupt harmony in the group. Speaking up may bring shame not only to themselves but also to their group. Therefore, this oppressive silence persists, unless custodians—parents or teachers—intervene [19]. On the other hand, in individualist cultures, personal freedom is highly valued, reporting bullying is less restrained. This social model takes a more forthright way in preventing aggressive behaviors, and victims are more willing to speak out and seek help. This difference in how bullying is dealt with reflects a broader cultural gap between cultures that prioritize group harmony and those that prioritize personal rights.

Considering the psychology behind these bullying behaviors, people in individualist cultures naturally support self-expression which allows those who have been hurt to step forward. But in collectivist cultures, people are restrained by the fear of shame and dishonor that admitting victimization may bring to the whole group. Therefore, the dichotomy in reporting reflects not differences in behavior, but ingrained social norms and values [20]. It highlights a long-lasting conflict between the individual's need for justice and the collective pressure for unity. The silent suffering of victims in one social setting contrasts with the vocal demands for accountability in another setting, creating an interesting conversation in the framework of anti-bullying strategies.

3.1.3. The Differences in Policies and Interventions

The complexity of bullying requires a thorough strategy to creating policies and interventions [21]. The different cultural values of collectivism and individualism influence varied methods of preventing bullying [22].

In collectivist societies, where group identity and consensus are highly valued, creating policies to preventing bullying behaviors becomes a balancing way. There's a challenge in acknowledging individual problems while also keeping harmony in the whole community. Strategies to take on bullying usually focus on communal approaches to build unity and social harmony [23]. For example, in the collectivist societies, schools may use classroom discussions or school-wide programs to promote a common understanding against bullying and emphasize every student's responsibility to prevent it. However, in prioritizing the group's well-being, there might be less attention offered to serious disciplinary actions or individual support for victims. This focus on the collective may unintentionally overlook the needs of specific individuals impacted by bullying.

In individualist societies, there's a strong focus on protecting individual rights, which forms policies and interventions concentrated on supporting victims. Policies in these societies detail strict measures against bullying, with clear support systems for those affected. These societies typically provide one-on-one counseling and personalized support strategies, highlighting the value of individual recovery. The focus on individual rights leads to systems where victims and bullies are dealt with individually, reflecting the belief in personal self-reliance and responsibility.

Despite these differences, the main goal is universal: to prevent the harm caused by bullying in educational settings. Whether through a collectivist lens that views the classroom as a connected whole or an individualist perspective that values each student's uniqueness, the goal is to prevent the damaging results of bullying that go beyond cultural differences.

It emerges that while policies and interventions may vary based on societies, they all recognize bullying as an important issue. Cultural differences and universal human rights fulfill, forming a comprehensive strategy that integrates the strengths of each approach. This promises a stronger and more comprehensive method to combat both the actions of the bully and the suffering of the victim in silence.

3.2. The Similarities of School Bullying

Despite the differences between collectivist and individualist societies, bullying shares common factors such as power imbalances, harmful social dynamics, and conflicts within this issue [24]. The core is that this problem revolves around the universal human desire for acceptance, belonging, and personal growth. No matter the cultural background, these fundamental desires create a paradox: the strong wish to fit in can sometimes lead to excluding others or trying to control them in school settings. This contradiction suggests that bullying is not confined to a single cultural context but is a widespread problem, appearing wherever there's an opportunity to assert power over others.

The suffering experienced by victims—emotional distress, pervasive anxiety, and overwhelming fear—is a common experience that affects individuals' mental well-being across different cultures. Moreover, the impact of bullying goes beyond those directly affected, affecting the entire school community [25]. It creates a harmful atmosphere in the school learning environment, filled with distrust, fear, and hostility, which affects the intellectual, emotional, and social development of all students. A school where bullying persists loses its purpose of being a nurturing and enriching space for learning [26].

The complex nature of bullying, combining shared traits and specific cultural norms, demands a multifaceted approach [27]. It beckons a global awareness, a unity across cultures in condemning bullying, and a strong dedication to uncovering and eradicating this social issue. To prevent the turmoil caused by bullying, the collective wisdom from diverse cultures and societies is vital in creating environments where human dignity and the essence of learning can thrive without obstruction. Only then can bullying be consigned to the history of education—a universally acknowledged, challenged, and overcome phenomenon [28].

4. Discussion

The discussion about school bullying has evolved significantly, especially through cross-cultural analysis shedding light on its psychological and social impacts [29]. Recent studies suggest an interesting proposition: in some cases, bullying in collectivist societies might have more severe effects on mental health than in individualist societies.

In collectivist cultures, there are typically tight-knit groups of teenagers with common values and behaviors. These groups form and strengthen in the larger community, making it challenging to differ the group's values without encountering consequences. This facet of collectivism may lead to a situation that the group's preferences dominate the larger community. So aggression emerges when these group values, not aligned with moral standards, enforce punishments on those who do not conform. This retaliation can turn into extreme bullying, developing intense and isolating exclusion and disgrace.

Bullying may become more distressing when it surpasses individual incidents and turns into a collective effort by a group to shame and control a peer. Smith et al.'s [12] study on group dynamics

in collectivist cultures shows a dual nature: while disagreements within the group may be rare, if they happen, the group can use exclusion and criticism to force conformity.

Think about what will happen when a student go against the beliefs of his student clubs. The group's response can vary from teasing to more severe social isolation. These behaviors, though not physical, can deeply affect one's self-worth, causing continuing anxiety and mental distress. This sort of collective bullying creates a battleground in the mind—a victim surrounded by his aggressive peers. This not only brings more bullies, but also increases the mental pressure on the victim. Punishing people who is not conformed in this tribal way reveals a distressing type of bullying that leaves lasting scars on the victim's mental health [30].

In individualist societies, bullying exists but takes on a different form. Seeking personal power can lead to severe bullying, yet these cultures encourage individuals to seek help and find solutions. While the impact on victims is still painful, these cultures provide ways to recover, reducing the mental health effects. Bullying, seen across different places and cultures, harms an individual's mental health. It's no longer just a schoolyard problem but a complex social issue that needs a thoughtful response considering cultural differences and compassion for everyone involved.

Underneath cultural differences, bullying affects people similarly, harming mental well-being [31]. This emphasizes the need for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals to work together, considering culture but being firm in protecting against bullying.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on the connection between bullying in educational settings and the ideas of individualism and collectivism. It discovered that in countries where people value individual success, bullying could make students feel more isolated. In countries where the community is more important, bullying might not be as noticeable, which can make it harder to solve. This research is valuable because it shows how different cultural views can influence bullying. Understanding this can help create better approaches to prevent school bullying that are effective for all types of communities.

References

- [1] Ogurlu, U., & Sariçam, H. (2018). Bullying, forgiveness and submissive behaviors in gifted students. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27(9), 2833–2843.
- [2] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2019). *PISA 2018 results (volume III): What school life means for Students' lives*. OECD Publishing.
- [3] Arslan, G., Allen, K. A., & Tanhan, A. (2021). School Bullying, Mental Health, and Wellbeing in Adolescents: Mediating Impact of Positive Psychological Orientations. *Child Indicators Research*, 14(3), 1007–1026.
- [4] Eastman, M., Foshee, V., Ennett, S., Sotres-Alvarez, D., Reyes, H. L. M., Faris, R., & North, K. (2018). Profiles of internalizing and externalizing symptoms associated with bullying victimization. *Journal of Adolescence*, 65, 101–110.
- [5] Uba, I., Yaacob, S. N., & Juhari, R. (2010). Bullying and its' relationship with depression among teenagers. *Journal of Psychology*, 1(1), 15–22.
- [6] Li, Z., Meng, X., & Zhang, J. (2021). A review of school bullying. In *Proceedings of the 2021 4th International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2021)* (pp. 171–175). Atlantis Press.
- [7] Feldman, R. S. (2016). *Life span development: A topical approach* (3rd ed.). Pearson.
- [8] United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019). *Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying*. UNESCO.
- [9] Hofstede, G. (1980). Motivation, leadership, and organization: Do American theories apply abroad? *Organizational Dynamics*, 9(1), 42–63.
- [10] Ji, L., Zhang, W., & Jones, K. (2016). Children's experience of and attitudes towards bullying and victimization: A cross-cultural comparison between China and England. In P. K. Smith, K. Kwak, & Y. Toda (Eds.), *School bullying in different cultures: Eastern and Western perspectives* (pp. 170–188). Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Nesdale, D., & Naito, M. (2005). Individualism-collectivism and the attitudes to school bullying of Japanese and Australian students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 36(5), 537–556.

- [12] Smith, P. K., Kwak, K., & Toda, Y. (Eds.). (2016). *School bullying in different cultures*. Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Smith, P. K., & Robinson, S. (2019). How does individualism-collectivism relate to bullying victimisation? *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1(1), 3–13.
- [14] Hearn, J., & Parkin, W. (2001). *Gender, sexuality and violence in organizations: The unspoken forces of organization violations*. SAGE Publications.
- [15] Hamlall, V., & Morrell, R. (2012). Conflict, provocation and fights among boys in a South African high school. *Gender and Education*, 24(5), 483–498.
- [16] Panetta, R. G. (1999). *Up the river: A history of Sing Sing prison in the nineteenth century* (Publication No. 9946209) [Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- [17] Moon, D. G. (2010). Critical reflections on culture and critical intercultural communication. In T. K. Nakayama, & R. T. Halualani (Eds.), *The handbook of critical intercultural communication* (pp. 34–52). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- [18] Carlyle, K. E., & Steinman, K. J. (2007). Demographic differences in the prevalence, co-occurrence, and correlates of adolescent bullying at school. *Journal of School Health*, 77(9), 623–629.
- [19] Smart, C. (Ed.). (1992). *Regulating womanhood*. Routledge.
- [20] Cassell, E. J. (1998). The nature of suffering and the goals of medicine. *Loss, Grief & Care*, 8(1–2), 129–142.
- [21] Marini, Z. A., & Volk, A. A. (2017). Towards a transdisciplinary blueprint to studying bullying. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(1), 94–109.
- [22] Dainton, M., & Zelley, E. D. (2023). *Applying communication theory for professional life: A practical introduction* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- [23] Tlou, P. S. E. H. (2018). *A strategy to combat bullying in primary schools in the Osizweni Circuit* [Master's thesis, University of the Free State].
- [24] Bibi, B., Afzal, M., Khatoon, N., & Khan, M. M. (2021). Rahman's spiritualism and personality improvement through Roger's self actualization. *Webology*, 18(5), 3595–3605.
- [25] Hamadouche, F. (2017). *The no child left behind act and the Black-White achievement gap in U.S. public schools* [Doctoral dissertation, Université Frères Mentouri-Constantine 1].
- [26] Habermas, J. (2018). *Philosophical-political profiles*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [27] Tuana, N. (2023). *Racial climates, ecological indifference: An ecointersectional analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- [28] Terrio, S. J. (2009). *Judging Mohammed: Juvenile delinquency, immigration, and exclusion at the Paris Palace of Justice*. Stanford University Press.
- [29] Kanwal, G., & Akhtar, S. (Eds.). (2018). *Intimacy: Clinical, cultural, digital and developmental perspectives*. Routledge.
- [30] Burke, A. S. (2002). Rational actors, self-defense, and duress: Making sense, not syndromes, out of the battered woman. *North Carolina Law Review*, 81, 211–316.
- [31] Clarkson, P., & Cavicchia, S. (2013). *Gestalt counselling in action*. SAGE Publications.