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The incidence and meaning of peer bullying in a multi-ethnic school

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Bullying between peers at school is a form of aggression between students, characterised by an asymmetric victim-aggressor relationship, typically iterative behaviour and with the intention to hurt (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1993). There are both short and long-term effects for the victim are observed, such as a decrease in self-esteem, a rise in anxiety, and difficulties in social integration. Abuses are manifested in such forms as social exclusion (ignoring the victim, not letting her/him participate), verbal aggression which can be direct (insulting the victim, calling her/him names) and/or indirect (spreading rumours), direct physical aggression (hitting, pushing) or indirect physical aggression (hiding, breaking and/or stealing the victim's property), making threats (verbally/with arms, blackmail, etc.) or sexual harassment. Typically, help is almost always absent: observers do nothing, or even may reinforce the aggressors; adults ignore or minimise the maltreatment. (del Barrio *et al.* 2001, 2003a; Olweus, 1993). Bullying is interpreted as the result of an interaction of factors from different contexts related to students (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), who stress the importance of considering it as a group phenomenon.

Studies in different countries, largely in Europe, show bullying as a typically masculine phenomenon, occurring mostly in pre-adolescence and early adolescence with a peak between 11 and 14 years of age. There are very few studies of incidences of bullying within minority ethnic groups (Randall, 1996), but cultural and ethnic differences are generally pointed as being among the features of a victim (Harachi, Catalano & Hawkins, 1999).

In multi-ethnic schools, racism adopts the form of abusive relationships (Besag, 1995). Racist bullying is defined as power abuse, including physical or psychological maltreatment, aimed at damaging a person of a different ethnic group and perpetrated by an individual, a group or an institution (Sullivan, 2000). It thus reveals attitudes towards different ethnic groups in action. Traditional studies of the development of ethnic attitudes have made more use of pictorial and projective material, as opposed to the direct observation of attitudes in real contexts (Aboud, 1988; Barret & Buchanan-Barrow, 2002). Peer racist bullying is an inter-group relation (Sullivan, 2000), defining an asymmetric power relationship favouring the in-group (of which the aggressor/s is/are member/s) and not the out-group (of which the victim is a member). While the in-group attains high self-esteem in comparison with the out-group, stereotypes develop about the out-group attributes (Schneider, 1991; Tajfel & Turner,1979).

When the out-group status is low, as it is in the case of ethnic minorities, social comparison is negative towards the out-group, weakening the group's self-esteem and generating an internal conflict which threatens its social identity (Phinney, 1996; Echebarría & Valencia, 1996). Negative stereotypes, prejudice and experience of discrimination are perceived as causes of rejection, resulting in a difficult integration of the minority into the culture of the majority, and preserving the relation with its own *ethnia* (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). In a certain sense, inferiority is accepted and leads its members to prefer the out-group (out-group favouritism).

In Latin America, ethnic groups try to preserve their culture, because hegemonic societies deny cultural heterogeneity. The term *Indian* illustrates the subordination and exclusion of a group in comparison to another group which is tacitly accepted as superior. The Mapuche are an ethnic group, corresponding to 10% of the Chilean population; the Mapuche situation is characterised by poverty and weakening of its cultural identity, influenced by the reduction of its original land and migration to urban environments (Parra *et al*, 2000). Schools contribute greatly to this transmission of a devaluated Indian culture: social inequalities in terms of identity and language are part of the so-called 'hidden curriculum' underlying students' cultural practices (McCarthy, 1994; Hopenhayn & Bello, 2001).

Although there is much more to be understood about the phenomenon, students from ethnic minorities are at higher risk of being attacked by their schoolmates. For instance, in both England and New Zealand classmates perceive Asian pupils as unaggressive and easily intimidated (Sullivan, 2000). Ethnic minority pupils report experiencing racist insults about their skin colour (Sullivan 2000), and often their reaction is to 'learn' indifference or to accept it as part of the subculture in which they live (Besag, 1995).

Racist bullying can be a subtle method of abuse that is not easily detected: it is difficult to demonstrate that social exclusion is ethnically motivated. To make this motivation explicit would cause the aggressor to lose part of the control of the relationship (Sullivan, 2000). A manifestation of the asymmetry of prejudice is the observed devaluation of their in-group by minority students (Aboud, 1997; Díaz-Aguado & Baraja, 1993; Tajfel, 1981). One strategy adopted to cope with rejection at school is a preference for members of minorities to socialise with those of their own *ethnia* - although a change in this can be observed when interaction between the two groups increases (Díaz-Aguado, 1996).

Study 1: The incidence of peer maltreatment among Chilean students

This study analysed the incidence and characteristics of abuses in a Chilean multi-ethnic school with Mapuche and non-Mapuche students. The participants were 153 students - 66 Mapuche and 87 non-Mapuche, 51 female and 102 male - from the city of Temuco. The majority (113 of the students - 26 Mapuche and 87 non-Mapuche) attended a public school. The remaining 40 were Mapuche from a residence for Mapuche students, who came to town for their secondary education. Students were in 7th (32) and 8th year (48) of primary education, and the first year of secondary school (73). Their ages ranged between 12 and 17 years (mean age=14.4).

The *Questionnaire for Students* from the Spanish Ombudsman's *Report on school violence* (Defensor del Pueblo, 2000) was used. This contained questions on the incidence of maltreatment, to be answered from a victim's, aggressor's or observer's perspective, and was administered to the entire group.

In general terms, the existence of peer maltreatment abuse was established. The severity depended on the type of abuse and the informant's position, as victim, aggressor or witness. Table 1 shows that name-calling and other verbal abuse were the most frequent (around 54% had experienced these), while the use of force, threatening with weapons and sexual harassment were less frequent; 22-50% suffered indirect physical aggression (belongings stolen, hidden or broken). 35% of participants reported social exclusion by their classmates; 26%, direct physical aggression; 25%, being threatened, and 15% had experienced other types of abuse.

This order of incidence is similar to that reported in the Spanish study (Del Barrio *et al*., 2001, 2003a) (verbal aggression, indirect physical aggression and social exclusion), but the frequencies are considerably higher among Chilean students (with the exception of spreading rumours), and in both studies the highest frequencies were reported by observers. Among Chilean students the number of victims was higher than number of aggressors in almost every category, except for ignoring and hitting.

Table 1: Incidence of different types of bullying reported by victims, aggressors and observers

Behaviour	Victims (%)	Aggressors (%)	Observers (%)
Ignoring	34.6	40.5	71.9
Not letting participate	35.9	24.8	66.0
Insulting	47.1	39.9	77.1
Calling names	64.1	52.9	84.3
Spreading rumours	51.0	32.0	78.4
Hiding things	44.4	29.4	78.4
Breaking things	22.2	10.5	50.3
Stealing	50.3	5.2	56.9
Hitting	26.1	31.4	72.5
Threatening to cause fear	24.8	19.6	72.5
Blackmail	3.9	2.6	28.1
Threatening with arms	3.9	3.9	30.1
Sexual harassment	7.2	3.3	30.1

The abuse of Mapuche students.

In Figures 1, 2 and 3 incidence differences for Mapuche (n=66) and non-Mapuche (n=87) students appeared from the victims', aggressors' and witnesses' perspectives. In both groups the incidence profile was similar for all perspectives, with verbal aggression as most frequent type of abuse. Non-Mapuche students reported more frequent abuse episodes. The only significant differences between the groups were among the students as observers.

This does not mean that the Mapuche students did not participate in abuse episodes. As victims, aggressors or witnesses, Mapuche students reported more social exclusion (being ignored and - as victims - not being allowed to participate). This type of maltreatment excluded any interactive bullying.

Figure 1: Mapuche and non-Mapuche students as peer victims

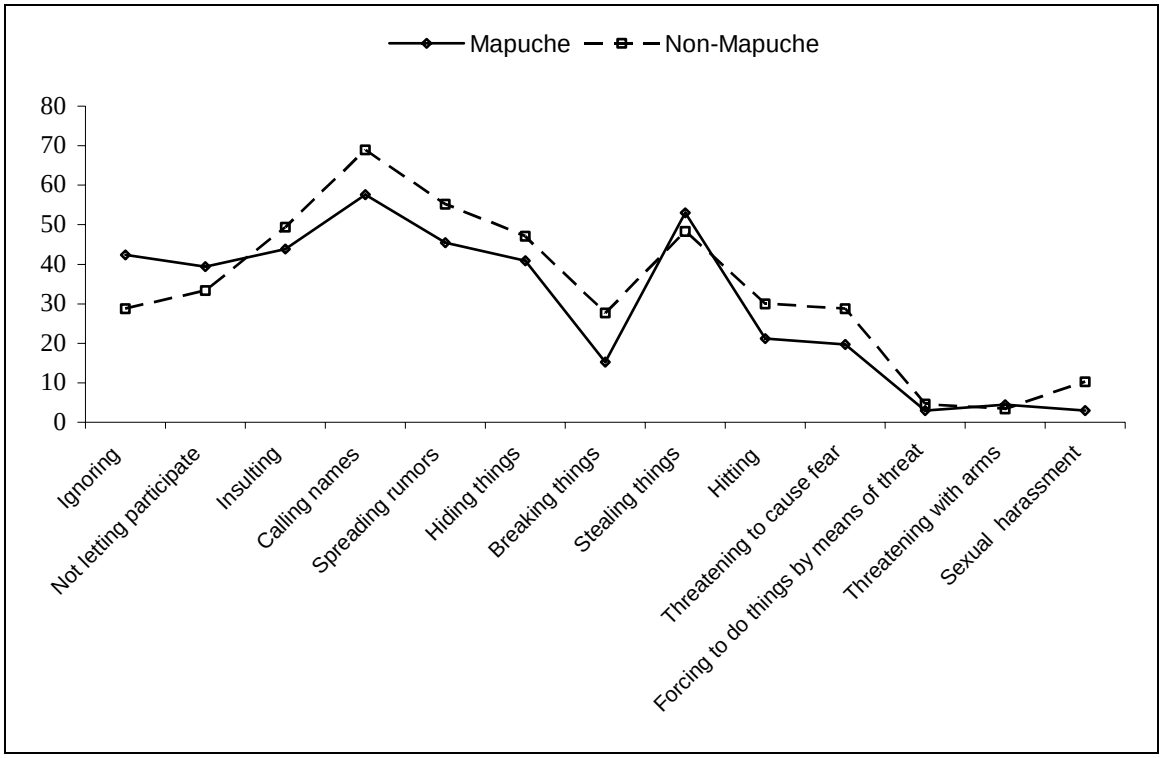


Figure 2: Mapuche and non-Mapuche students as peer aggressors

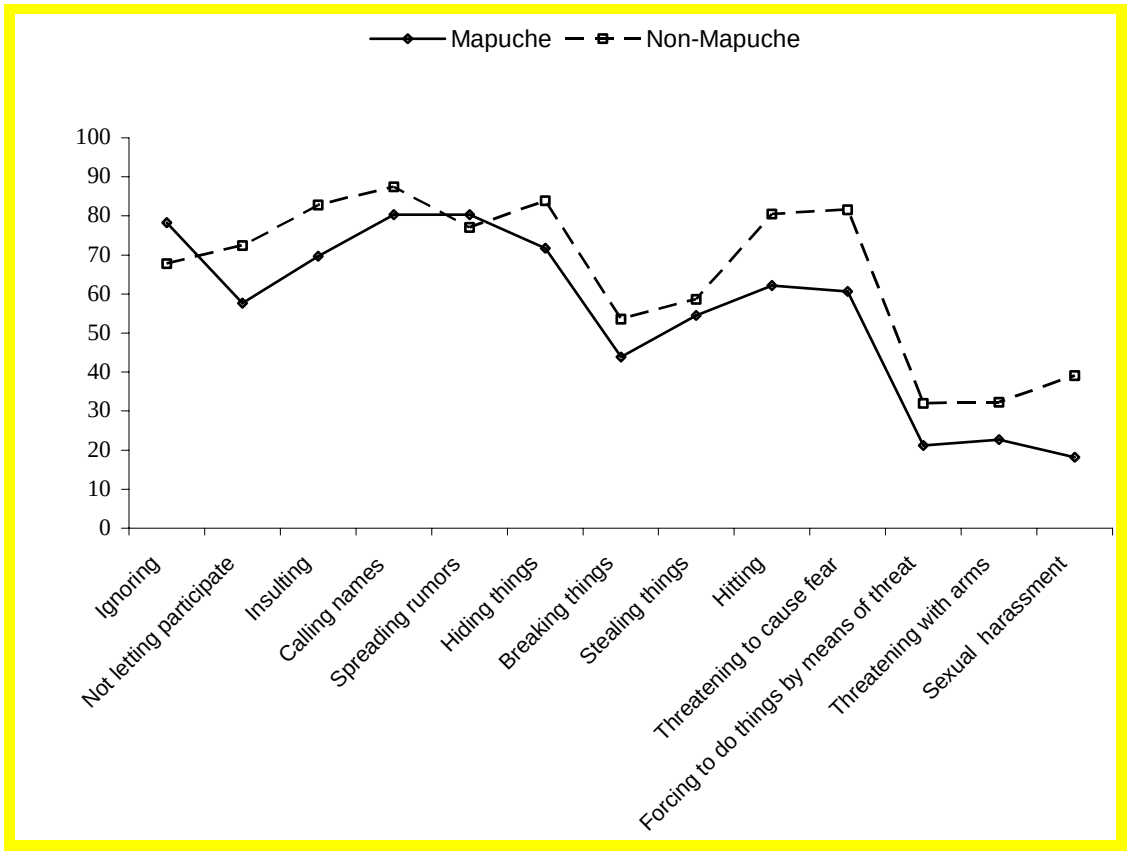
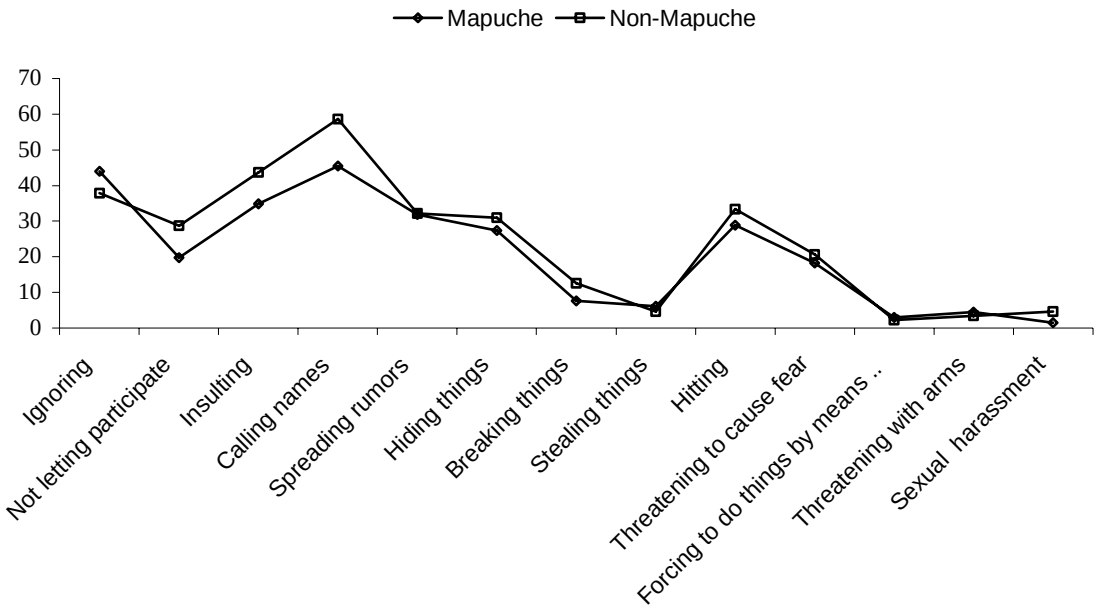


Figure 3: Mapuche and non-Mapuche students as peer- maltreatment observers



Study 2: Reflections on being Mapuche

The second study aimed at exploring Mapuche adolescents' representations of peer bullying, using a focus group of 10 voluntary participants - 4 male and 6 female- who had also participated in Study 1. The discussion session was recorded and later transcribed for analysis. A set of questions was used as a basic script for discussion, focussing on several issues: observation of phenomenon; causal explanation; *ethnia* as causal element; victims' feelings and reactions; reactions in witnesses; and personal experiences as Mapuche.

The existence of abuse by Mapuche and non-Mapuche students was mentioned, with the variety of manifestations and their different incidence, especially insults, not being allowed to speak, threatens, property being hidden, and fights. Behaviours of isolating, racist nicknames and property being stolen are mentioned most often.

Mapuche students relates the received abuse to their being Indian:

> *Generally they treat him as Indian, when they call him Indian they mean that person is filthy, thief. That's more or less the meaning they give to Indian, because they call him Indian, at the same time looking at him as if being less*

Indigenous family names, names of communities of origin, and accent all provoked offensive jokes, most often when Mapuche students were a minority in their classroom. Social exclusion was also stressed as another form of abuse:

> *You see it more often in a school when the majority are 'huincas', they are Chilean. For example if there are two Mapuche in the whole school and they have a very strange family name, a name that doesn't sound normal*

> *To be called Indian didn't happen to me, but they tried to isolate me*.

The dynamics of abuse are described reporting the unbalanced power relationship victim-aggressor and the intention of damaging the other.

Causal explanation

Elements thought to influence bullying were the personal attributes of aggressors (intention to damage, lack of respect toward others, and indifference: 'the others don't care about'; 'the only thing they want is to bother'. In other cases the maltreatment was attributed to ignoring the indigenous culture, but without any intention to damage.

The explanation attributed to victims included personal characteristics: their 'being Mapuche'; embedded physical and personality features (helplessness, shyness) and place of origin. Their usually rural origin was linked to their shyness, establishing a comparison between rural/Mapuche and urban/non-Mapuche. (The urban/rural comparison also spreads to the out-group: urban Mapuche were in a more advantageous position those from rural areas.) However, the Mapuche were considered to be passive and to see the necessity of not causing problems in their interaction with the non-Mapuche.

Other elements of a group nature were highlighted. The motivation for the aggressors' behaviour was explained as seeking the status provided by the submissive relationship. The difficulties of integration into a new group, or the passive role of the victim, were mentioned.

Victims' and witnesses' reactions

Their own feelings as victims and other students' reactions in the face of abuse were also mentioned in the discussion, as were feelings of uneasiness and fear toward aggressors, and passiveness. Witnesses' support for the aggressor(s), or help offered to victims, were also mentioned.

Participants' personal experience.

The first impressions on arriving at the secondary school were described, particularly the integration or discrimination experienced in the urban context. Many students appreciated those school activities which had a content related to their *ethnos*, which were interpreted as signs of acceptance. The Mapuche majority facilitated integration. Individual participants referred to the development of social skills as facilitating integration. Others reported integration as difficult, mentioning personal characteristics that helped maintain a level of isolation, such as shyness, or group factors such as the tendency to interact with the out-group.

Coping strategies

The Mapuche students developed cognitive and emotional strategies similar to those reported in other research (del Barrio *et al.*, 2003b; Hymel *et al.*, 1991): bolstering their perceived group characteristics to strengthen self-esteem (emphasising their quiet temperament and acceptance by teachers); minimising the significance of the situation; comparing themselves to others with fewer opportunities (feeling in a better position than past generations); and assuming a passive position regarding others.

Discussion

As found in the quantitative study, peer bullying exists amongst Chilean students and when directed towards Mapuche students, this is frequently in the form of verbal aggression (racist insults), hiding property and ignoring. Two of these are indirect: physically (hiding things) or relationally (ignoring): in bullying Mapuche classmates, the aggressor tried not to interact with the victim, who became a non-existing 'other'. This absence of contact determined that no other form of bullying toward Mapuche peers was necessary. Research should be extended into the negative consequences of social exclusion for the Mapuche students. Retrospective studies report this type of abuse as that most often mentioned when recalling experience od bullying in school (Van der Meulen *et al.*, 2003).

Mapuche adolescents represent their bullying as attributable to themselves - to their being Mapuche - in that it involves fixed and permanent attributes such as physical features, indigenous names and place of origin together with other negatively valued features. The category of Indian is a stereotype involving subordination and negation of the other (Hopenhayn y Bello, 2001). Social comparisons by the Mapuche are established from an unequal position of status and power, resulting in an ambivalent or negative view of their own ethnic group. Although Mapuche adolescents do not hold an explicitly negative opinion of themselves, they acknowledge the negative content of stereotyping, so a conflict of ethnic identity is elicited, reinforced by the content of the stereotype.

Narrations of school experiences confirm the verbal and relational bullying, and the asymmetry of ethnic prejudice (out-group favouritism) is illustrated by negative values of being Mapuche, coming from a rural area, being shy or relating only to other Mapuche. Causal interpretations facilitate their assimilation to dominant society more than their identification with the in-group. Coping strategies are suggested in terms of negation, acceptance or bolstering - trying to obtain a positive result from comparing themselves with non-Mapuche, for example, when discrimination is attributed to ignoring Mapuche culture. Every single sample of acceptance or help from the majority is appreciated (such as textbooks with Mapuche information). It is necessary to offer a positive image against prejudice. We have not investigated whether or not these strategies are effective in achieving personal acceptance, but it is interesting to identify the multiple cognitive and emotional adaptations adopted to explain the discrimination and to cope with its negative consequences.

It is hypothesised that Mapuche students adopt a position of inferiority in relation to non-Mapuche so that inter-group relations are not overtly difficult, and they feel less a victim of bullying than non-Mapuche. Discrimination is viewed as a consequence of being indigenous, not as a form of individual maltreatment.

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