





Bullying and Cyberbullying: The Role of Social Services in Prevention and Intervention

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Abstract

Bullying and cyberbullying are social phenomena of increasing relevance in today's digital society. These aggressive behaviors, which manifest themselves in various forms, have a significant impact on the lives of those who are victims, as well as on the social fabric as a whole. This paper aims to examine bullying and cyberbullying in detail, analyzing their dynamics, underlying causes and consequences, as well as prevention and intervention strategies. Traditional bullying, defined as an intentional and repeated act of physical, verbal or social aggression towards a weaker person, has long attracted the attention of scholars and social workers. However, with the expansion of digital technologies, cyberbullying has emerged as an increasingly insidious and pervasive form of aggression, exploiting online platforms to spread offensive messages, threats and insults. The growing ubiquity of digital connectivity has amplified the scope of bullying, allowing aggressors to target their victims anonymously and to reach a much wider audience. Furthermore, the intangible nature of many online actions can make cyberbullying more difficult to identify and address. The most significant goal is to investigate the root causes that fuel these aggressive behaviors, including relational dynamics, personal characteristics that can predispose to aggression, risk factors and victimization. Today, we need incisive actions in terms of prevention and interventions to be implemented in families, at school and in general in the world of minors. Social services can actively contribute in terms of taking charge of perpetrators and victims, using contrast methodologies aimed at promoting a more inclusive, respectful society and guaranteeing everyone the right to a life free from violence and discrimination.

Keywords: *Bullying, cyberbullying, social service; family; society; victimisation.*

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of bullying represents a complex and widespread social problem that occurs mainly within school environments, but which also finds confirmation in other spheres of daily life. It is characterized by the establishment of dynamics of aggression, intimidation and physical, verbal or psychological violence, by one or more individuals towards a weaker, more vulnerable subject or perceived as such. The term "bullying" comes from the English "bullying" (Grillone 2016) and refers to aggressive, repetitive and intentional behavior that aims to harm or put a person or a group in difficulty: this behavior can manifest itself in different ways, such as verbal harassment, threats, defamation, social exclusion, damage to personal property, physical aggression. It is also important to underline that it is not a spontaneous or isolated phenomenon, but rather involves a complex social and relational structure, in which the role of the aggressor, the victim and witnesses is of fundamental importance. The aggressor, also known as a bully, exercises his power and control over the victims, often more fragile or helpless, with the intention of asserting his superiority or obtaining personal gratification (Ascione 2007). The victims, on the other hand, suffer physical, psychological and emotional damage, which can negatively affect their well-being, their interpersonal relationships and their academic performance: the phenomenon can leave deep scars, compromising their self-esteem, self-confidence and perception of their own identity. Witnesses play a crucial role because they can contribute to perpetuating the phenomenon or, on the contrary, counteract it: in fact, their active participation can have a significant impact on the prevention and fight against bullying, through the adoption of supportive behaviors and the reporting of aggression to adults and the competent authorities. The causes are complex and multifactorial, involving individual, family, social and cultural aspects: individual factors may include low self-esteem, poor empathy, poor ability to manage emotions, antisocial behavior and the desire to assert one's power over others; In the family context, it can be favored by situations of conflict, domestic violence or inappropriate discipline; at the social and cultural level, the context in which one lives, social norms, media representations and the diffusion of stereotypes can contribute to shaping aggressive behavior (Buccoliero and Maggi 2005; Șerban, 2023). The fight against bullying requires a global and interdisciplinary approach involving families, schools, institutions, health workers, psychologists and society as a whole: it is essential to promote awareness and education against bullying, encouraging kindness, solidarity and mutual respect; it is also essential to create listening and support spaces for victims, so that they can express their experiences and receive the necessary emotional support. This is a serious and widespread social phenomenon that requires a collective effort to prevent and eliminate it; only through joint action, based on education, awareness and the promotion of positive values, will it be possible to create an environment in which each individual can live in harmony and mutual respect (Menesini, Nocentini and Palladino 2017)

2. Actors of bullying

To fully understand its scope and impact, it is essential to analyze and define who the actors involved in this phenomenon are (Micoli and Puzzo 2012), who can be divided into three main categories:

1. *the bully*: is the individual who perpetrates acts of bullying. This is a person who acts aggressively, intentionally and repeatedly towards another or a group, in order to exercise power and control over them. Bullies can present different personal traits, such as low self-

esteem, poor empathy, manipulative tendencies and a desire to assert their superiority over others;

2. *the victim*: is the person who suffers the aggression and abuse perpetrated; can be victimized for various reasons, such as physical appearance, ethnicity, social skills or other personal characteristics, which can experience a wide range of negative effects on their mental and physical health, including emotional distress, depression, anxiety, social isolation and, in extreme cases, suicide;

3. *bystanders*: these are those who witness bullying situations without actively intervening or taking a stand against them. They can be divided into two categories: passive bystanders and active bystanders: the former observe bullying without doing anything to stop it, often for fear of becoming targets themselves; the latter, on the other hand, can actively participate by encouraging the bully or spreading negative behavior.

3. Bullying, cyberbullying: risk factors

Bullying has serious consequences for all the actors involved: the bully, the victim and the surrounding community. In this discussion, the associated risk factors will be exposed, taking into account both the bully's and the victim's point of view.

Bullying, unlike a normal conflict between peers, is characterized by the use of repeated and intentional aggressive behaviors by an individual or a group of individuals towards another subject considered weaker (Aceranti, Colangelo, Margariti, Bertazzoni, Vernocchi, Ribero and Spini 2017). The risk factors for the bully can be divided into different categories:

Tab. 1 Individual factors

a) <i>Psychological and emotional dysfunctions</i> : the bully often presents psychological disorders, such as self-esteem problems, impulsiveness, antisocial tendencies and difficulties in managing emotions.
b) <i>Poor socialization</i> : family or social contexts in which he has been exposed to aggressive or violent behavior models can favor the adoption of such attitudes.
c) <i>Low self-esteem and insecurity</i> : the victim often has low self-esteem and a sense of insecurity, which makes him or her more vulnerable to attacks by bullies.
d) <i>Difficulty managing emotions</i> : some victims may have difficulty managing emotions and responding assertively to bullying.

Tab. 2 Family Factors

e) <i>Poor family dynamics</i> : A family environment characterized by abuse, violence or neglect can influence aggressive behavior.
f) <i>Lack of supervision</i> : Parents or guardians who are not present or attentive to the individual's activities and relationships can favor the development of aggressive behavior.
g) <i>Insufficient family support</i> : a lack of support and understanding from the family can aggravate the emotional and social distress of the victim.

Tab. 3 Environmental factors

h) <i>School climate</i> : a school environment with unclear social norms or tolerant towards bullying can encourage the bully to act without fear of consequences. Similarly, the victim is also exposed to several risk factors that can contribute to making the experience more devastating and harmful.
i) <i>Territorial dimension/neighborhood</i> : areas with high concentration of deviants and criminals; peer group with deviant subculture.

Tab. 4 School and social factors

1) <i>Social isolation</i> : the victim may be ostracized or isolated from other students, making it difficult to find support and friendships.

Bullying is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that involves different parties: on the one hand, the bully who, driven by individual, family and environmental factors, perpetrates aggressive behaviors towards vulnerable victims, who in turn are influenced by different risk factors (Civita 2006). Fully understanding them is crucial to develop prevention and intervention strategies aimed at effectively combating bullying and mitigating the damage it causes in society. Being a widespread problem throughout the world, it affects not only direct victims, but also has significant impacts on the surrounding environment. One of the key aspects in understanding the phenomenon concerns environmental risk factors; in this context, different dimensions can be identified that contribute to the onset and worsening of the phenomenon of bullying: first of all, the family environment plays a crucial role in encouraging or preventing bullying, since a family context in which parents show aggressive, violent or abusive behaviors can influence children to replicate such behaviors inside and outside the family (Parisi 2022). Furthermore, the lack of adequate supervision or positive emotional support can increase the risk of an individual developing deviant behaviors (Genta 2017). In parallel, the school environment plays a significant role: social dynamics, class organization, peer relationships, and the effectiveness of school anti-bullying policies can influence the onset and persistence of the phenomenon. The presence of a negative school climate, characterized by discrimination, stereotypes, and lack of inclusiveness, can provide fertile ground, as individuals feel less bound by social norms that promote respect and solidarity. Another relevant environmental risk factor is the presence of media that promote aggressive and violent behaviors. In particular, digital and online media can expose young people to harmful content that normalizes bullying, thus contributing to the spread of negative behavioral patterns; the constant accessibility and uncontrolled use of social media can amplify the spread of bullying and increase social pressure on individuals. Furthermore, the social and cultural context in which an individual is inserted can influence his/her propensity to be involved: social norms, cultural beliefs and community expectations can shape the behavior of young people, defining what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. As for the victim, the environment can also constitute a determining risk factor: an individual who lives in a social and family context in which he/she experiences rejection, isolation or abuse can develop an emotional vulnerability that makes him/her more susceptible (Barone 2016). Furthermore, the lack of adequate support and assistance from family, friends or school can amplify the negative effects, increasing psychological and emotional distress.

4. Protective factors

One of the fundamental aspects of addressing bullying is understanding and promoting protective factors, which play a crucial role in mitigating its impact and providing a safe and supportive environment for victims and potential targets (Stefani 2019). Some of the main protective factors in the context of bullying are:

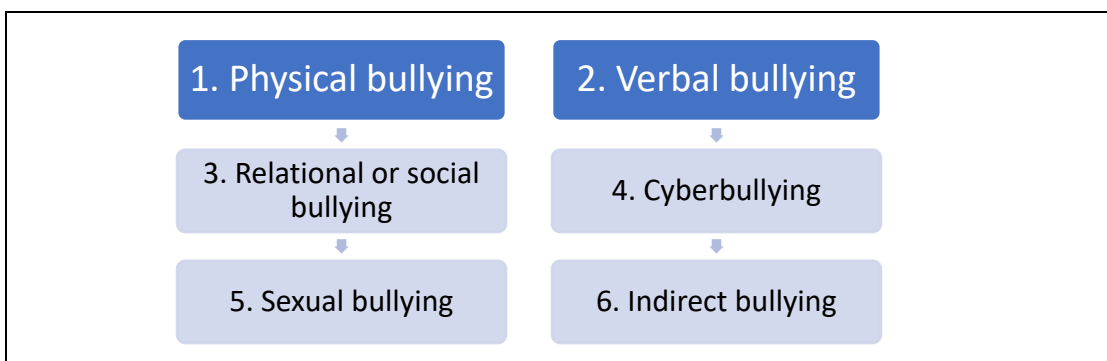
1. *individual factors*: they include the personal characteristics of the individual that can influence resilience, such as self-esteem, assertiveness, the ability to resolve conflicts in a constructive way and social skills. Individuals with good self-esteem and a positive sense of self tend to be less vulnerable to bullying and can better manage conflict situations;

2. *social support*: coming from family, friends and adults of reference. An environment in which individuals feel supported, understood and in which there is emotional and practical support can help improve the resilience of individuals and cope with the trauma caused;
3. *education and awareness*: Providing accurate information about the different forms of bullying, the negative consequences it entails and strategies to prevent it can help reduce the incidence and promote positive attitudes towards diversity and mutual respect;
4. *community involvement*: This includes parents, teachers, local leaders and members of society. Creating an environment where the community cares about the well-being of individuals and unites to combat bullying can have a positive impact in preventing and addressing this phenomenon;
5. *institutional policies and interventions*: Effective policies and interventions at school and workplace levels must promote a climate of respect, tolerance and inclusion, as well as clearly define the consequences for bullying. It is also important to ensure that there are well-defined reporting and support procedures for victims;
6. *promoting empathy and compassion*: Teaching empathy and compassion is essential to promoting mutual respect and preventing bullying. Individuals must learn to put themselves in the shoes of others and understand the consequences of their actions on the well-being of others. The holistic approach, involving individuals, families, communities and institutions, is essential to create an environment in which bullying can be effectively addressed, promoting respect and well-being for all.

5. Types of bullying

Bullying occurs in many forms and contexts, causing serious psychological and emotional damage to the victims involved. In the academic field, it is the subject of in-depth research in order to fully understand its facets and promote effective prevention and intervention strategies. The different types of bullying are distinguished based on the methods of aggression, the actors involved and the contexts in which they occur. Among the main types we can identify (Guarino, Lancellotti and Serantoni 2024):

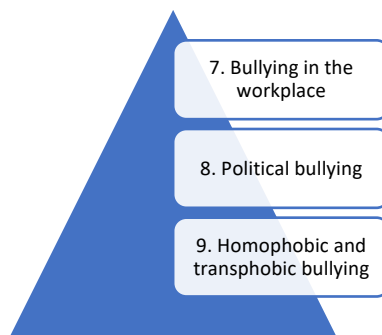
Tab. 5 Most common types of bullying and cyberbullying



1. *Physical bullying*: involves the use of direct violence or physical threats to harm or injure the victim. These actions may include punching, kicking, pushing, slapping, stealing personal property, or damaging property.

2. *Verbal bullying*: involves the use of offensive words, insults, humiliation, sarcasm, derision, and defamation with the aim of psychologically harming the victim. This type of bullying can occur in person or through digital means.
3. *Relational or social bullying*: involves social manipulation and the spread of false information with the aim of isolating the victim and damaging their reputation within a social group. It includes exclusion, gossip, defamation, boycotting, and refusal to interact.
4. *Cyberbullying*: occurs through the use of digital technologies, such as the internet, mobile phones, and social media, to spread offensive content, threats, insults, hate messages, or other forms of online aggression.
5. *Sexual bullying*: This includes unwanted behaviors of a sexual nature, such as harassing, making obscene or offensive comments, or discriminating based on gender or sexual orientation.
6. *Indirect bullying*: This involves subtle and subtle actions that harm the victim without direct contact, such as sending threatening anonymous messages, spreading rumors, or creating situations in which the victim is exposed to physical or emotional harm.

Tab. 6 New forms of bullying



1. *Workplace bullying (mobbing)*: also known as mobbing, occurs when an individual is subjected to aggressive, intimidating or harassing behavior in the workplace. This can include humiliation, isolation, unjustified criticism and professional sabotage.
2. *Political bullying*: occurs in the context of political life and involves aggressive behavior, threats, insults or falsification of information with the intent to harm or hinder the action of a political opponent.
3. *Homophobic and transphobic bullying*: involves aggression, discrimination and physical or verbal violence against individuals based on their sexual identity, sexual orientation or gender identity.

The above denotes the multidimensionality of the phenomenon, which takes various forms and manifestations, all of which have in common the presence of aggressive, repetitive and intentional behaviors that cause harm to the victims. Understanding and awareness of these different typologies are fundamental to promote prevention and intervention strategies aimed at effectively countering this phenomenon so widespread in contemporary society.

6. The modern phenomenon of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, as previously mentioned, is also a growing social phenomenon that manifests itself through aggressive, intimidating, threatening or harmful behaviors

conducted by individuals or groups through the use of digital technologies and online platforms (Lancini and Cirillo 2022). These behaviors occur mainly on the Internet, on social media, through messages, posts, comments, emails, forums, chatrooms and other forms of online communication and interaction. An accurate definition includes the idea that involves the intention to harm, the asymmetry of power between the aggressor and the victim, the repetitiveness of harmful actions and the digital context: a) intentionality emphasizes that cyberbullying acts are perpetrated deliberately to emotionally, psychologically or socially harm the victim; b) asymmetry of power refers to the disparity of strength, influence or control between the aggressor and the victim, which often manifests itself through disparity in age, social prestige, technical skills or size of the group; c) the repetition of harmful actions is a crucial element, since cyberbullying involves a series of actions carried out in a persistent manner, extended over time and targeted towards the same victim. This can intensify the negative effects on the well-being and mental health of the target person. The behaviors associated with cyberbullying can be diverse and include: defamation, insult, discrimination, racism, threats, social exclusion, non-consensual disclosure of private information (known as "revenge porn"), identity theft, spreading rumors, publishing harmful content and image manipulation. Furthermore, it can involve advanced techniques such as hacking, trolling, catfishing and hate speech. To address cyberbullying effectively, a multidimensional approach is needed that involves educators, parents, psychologists, legislators, online platform providers and society as a whole: this may include education on digital safety, promotion of empathy and respect online, implementation of targeted policies and laws, creation of technological tools for prevention and monitoring of cyberbullying, as well as psychological support for victims (Magistro 2020). Bullying and cyberbullying represent two contemporary manifestations of aggression and harassment involving individuals, usually young people; both share the harmful intent to harm, damage or humiliate another person, but differ in the context in which they occur and the ways in which they are perpetrated. Bullying is a phenomenon that occurs mainly in a physical and relational context, often within educational institutions such as schools or workplaces, and involves the use of physical force, verbal violence, offensive gestures or other forms of intimidation by one or more individuals against a weaker victim. Aggressive actions can be direct or indirect and include behaviors such as beating, social isolation, blackmail and defamation. On the other hand, cyberbullying is a more recent form that exploits digital technologies and online communication media and is characterized by the use of electronic devices such as computers, smartphones and tablets to carry out verbal, social or emotional aggression through online platforms such as social media. Actions may include sending threatening messages, disclosing private images or information without consent, online insults and defamation. One of the main differences lies in the communication channel used to perpetrate aggressive actions: in traditional bullying, contact occurs mainly in person, while in cyberbullying, aggression occurs virtually (Pennetta 2019). This characteristic makes the latter potentially more pervasive, as actions can reach a large audience quickly and almost anonymously, contributing to a greater spread of violence. Another significant difference is the persistence and immutability of actions in cyberbullying: digital information and communications can remain online for a long time or even permanently, leaving an indelible trace of the aggression suffered. This can have a devastating psychological impact on the victim, amplifying the emotional damage and the spread of the aggressive episode. Like the former, cyberbullying can also take different forms, each of which is influenced by a series of factors, ranging from social and psychological dynamics to technological and cultural aspects: one of the main types is direct cyberbullying, which manifests itself through

threatening messages, threats or defamation; These include flaming, which is the tendency to hurl insults on social media such as Facebook. Then we have indirect bullying, also known as relational bullying: in this case, cyberbullies try to damage the reputation and self-esteem of victims by spreading rumors, falsehoods or compromising images about them. This often happens through sharing embarrassing or compromising content on online platforms, chat groups or social networks. Another type is the so-called "outing" or "doxing", which consists of the unauthorized disclosure of personal or private information on the Internet, such as addresses, telephone numbers, sensitive data or private images (Lancini and Cirillo 2022). Cyberbullying can also manifest itself in the form of sexual cyberbullying, such as revenge porn or sexting, which involves the dissemination of sexual content without the consent of the person involved. This type of abuse can have serious psychological and social consequences for victims, leading to emotional trauma, shame, isolation and damage to self-esteem. The peculiar element inherent to the cyberbully is that the latter can act anonymously or under a false name, making it difficult to identify him and address the problem.

6.1. Hetero-normative practice in bullying

Within this dynamic, a discriminatory practice known as "heteronormativity" often manifests itself, a concept that deserves an in-depth analysis within this context: hetero-normative practice is, in effect, a cultural paradigm that refers to the imposition and social acceptance of behaviors and norms based on heterosexuality as the predominant model, which can have significant impacts on young people within the school environment and, consequently, can lead to discrimination, homophobia and transphobia towards individuals who do not conform to this norm, such as LGBTQ+ people (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and other identities) (Viola 2019). This model is often reflected in bullying dynamics, in which sexual and gender diversity become a trigger for aggression. It can therefore manifest itself through various discriminatory behaviors: for example, an individual may be a victim of bullying because of their sexual or gender identity that does not conform to socially accepted standards: being homosexual is a discriminatory factor that can translate into verbal, physical or psychological attacks, aimed at humiliating and isolating the victim. The aggressors, often driven by stereotypes and prejudices, tend to perpetrate bullying actions based on rigid and limiting concepts of masculinity and femininity: victims who do not correspond to these normative models may be subject to social pressure to conform or be the object of ridicule and violence, negatively affecting their self-esteem, emotional well-being and social participation. In order to combat this phenomenon, it is essential to promote education and raise awareness about different sexual and gender identities, encouraging respect and acceptance of the latter.

7. Bullying and cyberbullying: consequences and victimization processes

The consequences of bullying can be devastating for victims: on a psychological level, serious disorders such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop. Many young people present symptoms of anxiety and depression that can persist into adulthood, compromising their quality of life and emotional well-being. On a social level, it can damage interpersonal relationships and undermine trust in the community: victims often withdraw socially and isolate themselves, creating a vicious cycle of discomfort and isolation (Albiero 2021). Furthermore, bullying can perpetuate itself over time, with victims who, in turn, can become bullies in other contexts to try to regain the sense of power and control they have lost. For bullies themselves, involvement in aggressive

behaviors can have detrimental effects on their future, as they often show a decline in school performance, problematic relationships with others and can end up in situations of legal or criminal conflict. Bullying is not only a problem for the victims, but has negative implications for the entire society, affecting the social climate, the school environment and community cohesion. It is crucial to address this problem through preventive strategies and targeted interventions: schools and educational institutions must implement awareness programs, teacher and student training, as well as zero-tolerance policies for bullying (Strohacker et al 2021). It is also essential to involve families and the community in promoting a healthy and respectful environment.

a) the victimization

Victimization is a central concept in criminological studies and sociology of deviance: it refers to the condition in which an individual or a group suffers harm, violence, or discrimination by other individuals or groups, assuming the role of victim in a social context (Saponaro 2004). In the criminological context, it can be analyzed under different theoretical perspectives, which state that the victim, through his or her behavior or personal characteristics, can somehow contribute to his or her own state, placing attention on the internal dynamics of the victim himself or herself, such as lifestyle or choices that can increase exposure to the risk of suffering harm. On the other hand, social theory emphasizes the role of social structures and inequalities in society, which can create favorable conditions for victimization, analyzing factors external to the individual, such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and social marginalization, which can predispose some individuals or groups to suffer violence or injustice (Elias 1986). Victimization in the context of bullying is configured as a process by which an individual suffers repeated aggression, humiliation, or harassment by one or more aggressors, who intend to exercise control and dominion over the target subject. This aggressive attitude can manifest itself in different forms, such as physical violence, offensive verbalizations, social exclusion, online defamation, and other behaviors that are harmful to human dignity. We also talk about secondary victimization, a concept that refers to the reactions and social behaviors that a victim of a crime may suffer after the criminal event itself; it involves making an individual who has suffered a crime relive the same conditions of suffering (Gallina 2016) and can arise from interactions with the justice system, the media, society and even friends and family. It is a critical aspect in the context of criminal justice and victim support, as it can profoundly affect well-being and the perception of justice. One of the most relevant aspects is the way in which the justice system treats victims during the legal process: often, victims feel exposed, subjected to pressure and negative judgments by lawyers, judges and defendants' lawyers, contributing to a perception of injustice and poor protection by the system and affecting the participation of victims in the process itself. The media also play a significant role, as they can amplify the emotional and psychological impact of the crime on the victim: the spread of sensational details, the public exposure of the victim and the lack of respect for privacy can intensify the trauma and suffering of the victim, negatively affecting the mental health and the ability of the victim to recover from the traumatic experience (Gulotta 1976). Society itself can contribute through negative judgments, stereotypes and prejudices towards the victims, who may feel judged, blamed or marginalized by the community, thus increasing their sense of isolation and guilt, ending up hindering the ability of the affected subject to rebuild their life after the criminal event. Expressions such as 'you asked for it' or 'it's your

fault' represent ways of victimizing those who have sought assistance, contributing to intensifying their sense of loneliness and desperation. On the other hand, the correct way to provide support is to make it clear to the individual involved that he or she is not to be considered responsible for the acts suffered, nor guilty of them, but rather a victim of violence, whether physical or emotional. It occurs mainly due to various factors, including cultural, procedural, social and psychological aspects that converge and interact in a complex way, contributing to the occurrence of this form of victim-blaming and re-victimization (Iannaccone 2017). The most common reasons that explain its onset are:

1. *stereotypes and social preconceptions*: society often perpetuates stereotypes and preconceptions about survivors of crimes, especially regarding sexual crimes. Consequently, these can influence the way victims are treated, with victim blaming or doubts about the veracity of their testimony;

2. *lack of training and awareness*: legal system operators, including lawyers, judges, police and medical personnel, may not be adequately trained or sensitized on empathetic and respectful management of victims. Lack of understanding of the needs and sensitivities of victims can lead to inappropriate or insensitive behavior;

3. *invasive interrogations and procedures*: victims may be subjected to detailed and invasive interrogations, sometimes phrased in a way that calls into question the victim's credibility. This type of interrogation may re-enact the traumatic experience and aggravate the trauma already suffered;

4. *sensational media exposure*: crime cases, especially those of a sensitive nature, often attract media attention. Distorted or sensational portrayals of the victim and the details of the traumatic event may lead to hasty judgments by the public, intensifying the trauma and victimization.

5. *lack of adequate support*: limited access to psychological, medical and social support services may leave victims without a support network essential to overcome the traumatic event. This lack of support may exacerbate the damage suffered.

It is therefore essential to address secondary victimization through targeted interventions and widespread awareness-raising. The justice system must adopt policies and practices that place the needs and rights of victims at the centre, ensuring respectful and empathetic treatment; furthermore, the media must be responsible in the presentation of news related to crimes, respecting the privacy and dignity of victims.

b) Types of victims

Among the different figures involved in the context of bullying, victims represent a fundamental element to understand the dynamics and implications of this phenomenon; various profiles emerge that represent different ways in which individuals can experience and react to the phenomenon of bullying: the passive victim, for example, is characterized by a tendency to suffer without reacting in an aggressive or provocative way. This type of victim can be identified as an individual who, often due to shyness, insecurity or fear, finds himself in a position of vulnerability towards the aggressors (Bene 2022). On the other hand, the provocative victim is an individual who, in one way or another, can contribute to triggering conflict situations or provoke bullies, as he or she can have aggressive, overbearing or arrogant attitudes, pushing the aggressors to target him or her. However, it is important to underline that bullying is never justifiable, even towards those who display

provocative behavior. We also have the ambiguous victim, who is characterized by an ambivalent and nuanced position within the context: he or she may be involved in negative dynamics without showing clear resistance or opposition, since he or she may not be fully aware of his or her victimization or may try to minimize the experience. This attitude may derive from a lack of awareness of the seriousness of the situation or from fear of the social consequences that could arise from addressing the problem openly (Karmen 2004). On the other hand, the reactive victim is an individual who is clearly bullied and is aware of it; he or she may react emotionally and clearly express his or her suffering. The reactive victim may be characterized by a greater sensitivity to aggression, and this may be due to a personal history of trauma or a greater perception of injustice. However, sometimes the reactive victim may experience difficulties in finding effective strategies to deal with bullying and may feel helpless in trying to put an end to it. Finally, the violent outcast is an individual who, due to the experience of bullying or other situations of marginalization, reacts with aggressive or violent behavior: it represents an extension of the phenomenon, since the violent outcast can transform his or her suffering into destructive behaviors towards others (Bandini 1991). This reaction can derive from accumulated anger, from the search for revenge or from the desire to regain a sense of power and control in one's life.

c) Bullying and moral disengagement

Moral disengagement is a complex and multifaceted concept that requires in-depth analysis and understanding of its multiple implications in contemporary society: it refers to the lack of commitment to ethical and moral norms by individuals, groups or communities. This attitude can manifest itself in different forms, such as breaking laws, lack of social responsibility, indifference to the well-being of others and lack of consideration for the ethical context in which one finds oneself. It is a worrying phenomenon, as it undermines social cohesion, mutual trust and the general well-being of the community. The causes can be varied and complex and one of the main factors is the influence of the social and cultural environment in which an individual grows and develops: an environment that promotes individualism and excessive competition can foster selfish behavior and lack of moral commitment. Furthermore, continuous exposure to media messages that normalize antisocial behavior or immorality can negatively influence people, leading them to disengage from moral values. Another important aspect concerns the education received: moral education plays a crucial role in the development of morally responsible individuals. However, if education is inadequate or, in the case of its absence, individuals may not have the knowledge or awareness necessary to act in an ethically correct manner. Furthermore, the absence of positive moral models in an individual's life can contribute to moral disengagement. The consequences are multiple and impactful: at the individual level, it often leads to low self-esteem, a sense of inner emptiness and a lack of satisfaction in life; at the social level, moral disengagement can lead to an increase in crime, corruption and injustice, endangering the stability and prosperity of the community. According to the theory proposed by Albert Bandura, moral disengagement refers to the act of deactivating one's moral and social mechanisms, allowing an individual to carry out actions that he would normally judge as negative or immoral (Bandura and Mazzeo 2017). With a particular focus on the cognitive processes that influence human behavior, among the central concepts of his theory are the mechanisms of moral disengagement, which outline the strategies that people adopt to reduce the dissonance between their behavior and their moral standards. These allow them to justify or minimize the impact of morally reprehensible actions:

Tab. 7 Main mechanisms of moral disengagement identified by Bandura (2017)

<i>Moral justification</i> : involves reinterpreting the action or event to make it morally acceptable or even virtuous, even though it may be contradictory to one's values. This mechanism helps reduce feelings of guilt or cognitive dissonance.
<i>Euphemistic labeling</i> : involves using mitigated or abstract language to describe negative or immoral actions, thus reducing the perception of immorality or the emotional impact associated with such actions.
<i>Advantageous comparison</i> : involves comparing one's own morally questionable behavior with that of other people who have acted in an even more morally reprehensible way. This comparison can lead to a relativization of the action, considering it less serious in comparison to other behaviors.
<i>Responsibility shift</i> : involves transferring blame or responsibility to other people, external circumstances, or higher authorities. In this way, the feeling of personal guilt is attenuated.
<i>Diffusion of responsibility</i> : involves sharing responsibility for an immoral action with other individuals or the social context, thereby reducing personal guilt and distributing blame across multiple people.
<i>Attribution of blame</i> : involves assigning responsibility for the immoral action to someone else or to external circumstances. This helps avoid accepting one's own moral responsibility for the action.
<i>Distortion of consequences or non-consideration of consequences</i> : involves minimizing or distorting the negative consequences of the immoral action. Ignoring or underestimating the consequences helps justify the immoral behavior.
<i>Dehumanization of the victim</i> : involves representing the victim as non-human or less worthy of moral consideration. This mechanism reduces empathy and guilt towards the victim, facilitating immoral behavior.

8. Bullying and the role of Social services

The family represents one of the most significant and influential contexts for the multidimensional development of individuals, as it is a complex and dynamic system, in which interactions, affective bonds and roles play a crucial role in the evolution of people. First of all, it is important to consider the concept of family as an interconnected system of relationships¹: each member is an essential element within this system, contributing in a unique way to the overall dynamics. Family relationships can be influenced by various factors, such as culture, beliefs, social norms and past experiences, elements that, consequently, contribute to shape family dynamics and determine the emotional climate within the family nucleus (Galavotti 2016).

A crucial aspect is represented by the structure itself, as these agencies can assume different configurations, such as the nuclear family, the extended family, the single-parent family and other non-traditional forms: each of these influences family relationships and dynamics in a different way, with significant implications for the psychological development of family members. Psychological theories provide different models to understand family dynamics and their impact on individual development: for example, family systems theory considers the family as a complex system in which each member is interconnected and influences the others; in this context, interactions within the family can be analyzed through the concept of feedback, in which the actions of one member influence the behavior and emotions of other members. Another important theory is attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, which argues that the first affective bonds between a child and his parents are fundamental for later emotional and social development (Holmes 2017). One of the central aspects concerns attachment styles, which describe the relationship patterns that develop based on early

interactions between the child and the main attachment figures, usually parents or caregivers. Studies have identified four main attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant and disorganized; each of which reflects different ways in which the child interacts with attachment figures and faces separations and reunions with them. The first style, secure attachment, develops when the child is certain that his emotional and physical needs will be met in a reliable and consistent way by caregivers. The child explores the surrounding environment with confidence and relies on attachment figures in case of need, knowing that he can count on them. On the other hand, anxious-ambivalent attachment manifests itself when the child experiences ambivalent behavior in care and attention from caregivers: the former, in fact, may be worried about the availability of attachment figures and may express anxiety and discomfort in an intensified way, often showing a constant request for attention (Pesaresi 2021). Avoidant attachment develops when the child lives an inconsistent experience of care or is frequently ignored by caregivers. In response, the child tends to minimize or avoid emotional contact and dependence on others, trying to be self-sufficient and autonomous. Finally, disorganized attachment manifests itself in situations where the infant is exposed to traumatic or frightening behaviors from caregivers, such as abuse or severe neglect. This style can lead to contradictory and chaotic behavior in an attempt to deal with internal conflicts generated by such traumatic experiences. The importance of attachment styles lies in their ability to influence the way people relate to others in adulthood: individuals with a secure attachment tend to build stable and satisfying relationships, showing a good capacity for emotional regulation; those with anxious-ambivalent attachment may be more anxious and dependent in relationships, while those with avoidant attachment may have difficulty opening up emotionally and trusting others; finally, individuals with disorganized attachment may show impulsive behaviors and unstable relationships due to traumatic experiences during childhood. Secure attachment, characterized by sensitive parents who are responsive to the child's needs, is clearly associated with better emotional regulation, self-esteem and positive interpersonal relationships in adulthood. The psychological analysis of the family also includes the examination of roles and power dynamics: members assume specific roles based on their age, gender and cultural expectations such as, for example, the role of parent involves responsibility in educating and protecting children. For this reason, when we talk about parents we refer to educational styles: each one embodies their own previous experiences, thus influencing their parental role in a peculiar way (Attili 2018). Individual idiosyncrasies do not exclude the ability to orient oneself between the different parental educational methods, offering instead the opportunity to promote change in established situations, clearly committing to ideas and goals; inevitably, within each family unit, the peculiarities blend together, giving rise to a unique approach. However, it is of fundamental importance that both parents learn to collaborate and integrate their differences in order to develop a congruent and functional approach. Educational styles derive from the synergy of two levels: control and support: the first concerns the solicitations exerted by parents to promote socially appropriate behaviors in their children, implementing mechanisms of supervision and regulation; while the second refers to support, emotional intimacy and the propensity to satisfy the needs of children, activating the mechanisms that favor self-control and self-affirmation. Both components have a neutral character, and it is the use and balance between them, together with the family context and the characteristics of the family, that determine the positive or negative value of the educational style that manifests itself (Vernocchi 2020). It is precisely from the convergence of these two dimensions that four possible educational styles emerge: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive/indulgent and neglectful/rejecting:

1. *authoritarian educational style*: it is characterized by a high demand for conformity and discipline. Parents who adopt this style impose strict rules and strictly control the behavior of their children. Decisions are made unilaterally by the parents, without taking into account the opinions or wishes of the children. In this context, punishment is often severe and coercive. Individuals raised in this environment may develop a sense of fear and insecurity, with consequences on self-esteem and autonomy;
2. *permissive parenting style*: it is characterized by a low imposition of rules and limits. Parents tend to be more indulgent, tolerant and accommodating towards their children's behavior. In this context, children may have difficulty understanding social expectations and developing a sense of responsibility. The absence of clear rules can lead to problems with self-regulation and a distorted view of social norms;
3. *authoritative parenting style*: it is considered the optimal balance between limits and affection. Parents impose clear rules and expectations, but at the same time maintain a warm and affectionate emotional environment. This parenting style promotes open communication, encouraging dialogue and discussion between parents and children. Individuals raised by authoritative parents tend to develop good self-esteem, autonomy and social skills;
4. *rejecting parenting style*: it is characterized by a lack of involvement and attention from parents, who may be emotionally absent or focused on their personal occupations, neglecting the emotional and physical needs of children. This parenting style can generate serious consequences on the emotional and behavioral well-being of children, with a high risk of developing self-esteem problems, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and risky behaviors.

8.1 Family and socialization role

But why is the family universally understood as the first agency for the socialization of the child? (Curione and Manobianca 2022). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of the following factors:

1. *physical proximity and continuous interaction*: it is the first environment in which the child spends most of the time and is exposed to continuous interactions with the members. This physical proximity offers the opportunity for direct and meaningful interaction, through which the child learns to communicate, express emotions and understand the behavior of others;
2. *behavior modeling*: family members, especially parents, act as behavior models for the child, who imitates the actions and reactions of others, thus learning social norms and basic social skills. For example, the way in which parents communicate, resolve conflicts and manage emotions will influence the child's behavior and social skills;
3. *transmission of values and norms*: it is the main vehicle for the transmission of values, beliefs and social norms. Adults within guide the child in acquiring cultural, moral, religious and ethical values that are important to the society in which he lives as they provide a basis for understanding what is considered right, wrong and appropriate in his cultural context;
4. *provision of emotional and affective support*: provides an environment in which the child can experience the emotional and affective support necessary for healthy development. The affection, love, attention and comfort he receives help create a secure base from which to explore the outside world and build positive relationships with others;

5. *learning social skills*: the child has the opportunity to learn crucial social skills such as sharing, cooperation, compassion, empathy and managing interpersonal relationships. These social skills are essential for success in daily life and in interactions with others.

8.2 Social Work in the fight against forms of bullying

Social work is concerned with promoting well-being and improving the quality of life of individuals, families and communities; it is based, in fact, on ethical principles and values such as social justice, equity, respect for diversity and solidarity, and social workers, professionals in the sector, work to help people overcome the challenges and difficulties they may encounter in their daily lives. One of the fundamental objectives is to promote social change and the positive transformation of people's living conditions¹: this occurs through the identification and addressing of the structural causes of social problems and the adoption of targeted interventions that can improve the situation of the people involved (Bertotti and Fazzi 2021). In the Italian context, social work has a long history and has undergone several transformations over the years: initially, social assistance in Italy was mainly organized on a voluntary basis and based on family and community solidarity networks; However, during the 20th century, as society evolved and social problems became more complex, greater professionalization of the sector became necessary. Currently, it is governed by laws and regulations that define its skills, ethical obligations and the training path required to become a social worker. Social workers must respect a code of ethics that emphasizes the importance of confidentiality, non-discrimination and protection of the rights of the people they assist. Their skills include assessing client needs, planning and implementing interventions, coordinating services, mediation and promoting people's autonomy (Sicora 2021). A fundamental aspect is the systemic and ecological approach, which considers people as part of complex and interconnected systems and takes into account the relationships between individuals, families, communities and institutions, recognizing the importance of a holistic intervention that takes into account all these levels. For this reason, they are also involved in social issues such as bullying and cyberbullying: their involvement, together with that of health services, in the fight against these mechanisms requires an integrated and multidisciplinary approach that combines the efforts of different professional figures, such as social workers, psychologists, doctors, educators and other health workers. Early identification of bullying situations is essential to intervene promptly and prevent further psychological and physical damage; interventions should be based on specific and personalized therapeutic approaches, with the aim of helping victims overcome the traumatic experience and holding aggressors accountable so that they understand the consequences of their actions. In Italy, Law 70/2024 has represented and represents an important step forward in the Italian legislative landscape to combat the phenomenon of bullying and violence in schools: this legislation was promulgated in order to promote a safe and inclusive school environment, where students can learn and grow without being victims of acts of physical or psychological violence. This law aims to address the problem of bullying through a multidimensional approach that involves educational institutions, families, students themselves and the community as a whole. Among the main provisions of this law, there is the obligation for schools to adopt prevention and intervention plans against bullying, with the aim of raising awareness and training school staff, as well as involving students in educational paths aimed at promoting respect and inclusion. Furthermore, it provides sanctions for those responsible for acts of bullying, thus encouraging greater responsibility and awareness of the legal consequences related to such harmful behaviors. It therefore aims to create a climate of zero tolerance towards bullying, encouraging a cultural change in

which violence and aggression are stigmatized and prevented through education and information.

9. Conclusions

This work, although not exhaustive, has attempted to investigate the complex phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying, highlighting their origins, manifestations, impacts and strategies for prevention and intervention. It must unfortunately be stated that these phenomena represent a threat to the psychological, social and emotional well-being of the individuals involved, as they can cause lasting damage to the victims and even to the aggressors themselves. It is therefore essential to address these issues with a multifactorial approach, involving the school, the family, the community and the media. Prevention and intervention strategies must be based on solid scientific evidence and involve all key actors, including teachers, parents, mental health professionals and legislators. Furthermore, education and public awareness are fundamental tools, as they can help change attitudes and behaviors: only through a collective effort and the promotion of a culture of respect and kindness can we hope to reduce the incidence of these harmful phenomena in our society. The prevention and management of bullying and cyberbullying are not only moral tasks, but also a necessity to ensure a safe and healthy environment for future generations. Bullying and cyberbullying are a serious social scourge that cannot be underestimated or ignored, as they have a negative impact not only on direct victims, but also on society as a whole. Tolerance and acceptance of differences must be promoted among the younger generations. With regard to victim support, it is essential to create an environment in which these people can feel listened to and protected: educational institutions and non-governmental organizations must offer prevention programs and psychological support for victims. Above all, and even before that, it is necessary to encourage victims to report cases of aggression and take effective measures to deal with bullies. In order to definitively curb bullying and cyberbullying, it is necessary to consider the importance of rigorous legislation that punishes those responsible for these harmful actions: online platforms and social media must actively collaborate to combat them and promote responsible use of the Internet.

Authors contributions

Ionuț Virgil Șerban was involved in research design, the literature review, analysis and interpretation, chapters 1, 2, 3 and 6 and drafting of conclusions.

Nicola Malizia was involved in research design, the literature review, chapters 4, 5, 7 and 8, analysis and interpretation, and drafting conclusions.


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