



# Defining Bullying in the Indonesian Context: A Systematic Review

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**Abstract.** Bullying has largely been heavily studied in western school contexts using western social norms as to ascribe meaning to this phenomenon. This research has informed work on bullying in Indonesia and shaped efforts to stop it. However, bullying cannot be separated from the local context in which it occurs or from the social and cultural practices of the individuals involved. This research aims to provide a meaning of bullying based on Indonesian culture and social context and the differences with the West. The research method used is a systematic review was undertaken to identify literature on bullying relevant to the observed contextual factors in Indonesia. The PICO (Problem-Intervention-Comparison-Outcome). Research results obtained from the literature review indicate that bullying in Asian cultures, which are characterized by high conformity, tends to take a different form from bullying that occurs in western environments. The difference between bullying in western schools and in Indonesia, Bullying in the western context is often defined as aggressive behavior that is intentionally and repeatedly directed at individuals who cannot defend themselves. Oppression in Indonesia is based on a cultural context that is dominated by social groups

**Keywords:** Bullying, Indonesian Context, Systematic Review

## 1 Introduction

Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world and represents the largest Muslim community [1]–[5]. While six official religions are recognized, approximately 90% of the population is Muslim. Religion is a major influence in the public environment, including in education. There is a parallel system of education with public and private schools operating under both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs [6]–[8]. The teaching of morals and values as part of classes in religious studies are part of the national curriculum at all levels, including the tertiary level [9]. Most Indonesians view themselves as religious, moral, upright, generous, respectful, and courteous [10]. These desirable characteristics are embodied in many traditional sayings that are widely used and understood. Outside of Indonesia, the society tends to be seen as non-violent and easy going by foreign observers, who generally view the people as polite, reserved, and respectful. This supposedly peaceful

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society has been part of the attraction of Bali, one of Indonesia's 17,000 islands, that has been a holiday destination since the Dutch colonial period [11].

Below this placid exterior, Indonesian society has a very different dynamic that is invisible to the casual observer who does not possess a very in depth understanding of the local culture and who does not speak Indonesian fluently. In reality, Indonesian society is extremely competitive, hierarchical and can be brutal to those who do not fit in to their expected social role. These characteristics give rise to a culture where bullying is widespread and, to a large degree accepted. Interestingly, though, bullying has generally not been seen as a serious problem until recently. Share food will often be teased and called names because of the disruption to the group dynamic that this behavior causes.

This situation has two important implications for understanding bullying in Indonesia. The first of these is that teachers, parents, and even the victims of bullying often do not view bullying as negative, especially if it does succeed in encouraging behavior change in the direction of fitting in. Our research, which involved 66 fifth and sixth graders in three schools in West Sumatra along with their teachers, found that teachers, when asked to describe the bullying of a student in their class, often viewed the comments and jibes of other students as an appropriate reaction to the victim who was behaving in an inappropriate manner. In this sense, they saw the bullying as an attempt to correct aberrant social behavior that appropriately came from the members of the peer group who was manifesting a kind of concern that the victim was not demonstrating solidarity. Similarly, those individuals doing the bullying often do not feel they are doing anything wrong. If the victim feels bad, they suggest, he or she should act like everyone else. Since Indonesian children tend to be socialized to want to be like the people around them, victims of bullying frequently do accept the negative treatment and try to change, as reported by [12] and others. [13] further note that Indonesian students, offered cues to describe bullying they had experienced, reported extremely low incidence of being bullied because of their appearance or being the victim of physical violence (both common in western settings). Instead, more than 20% reported being bullied for some other reason that was not part of the list. It is not hard to guess that this would relate to not fitting in to the group in some way.

The second implication is that western definitions of bullying have little relevance in Indonesian schools. This is plainly seen in published literature on bullying by Indonesian researchers, who often struggle to fit western understandings and frameworks to the local context. It is difficult to explain to Indonesian teachers and students what exactly the English term "bullying" refers to because the specific social interactions understood by native speakers of English are foreign to the Indonesian social context. Also, bullying in western schools often involves physical violence, which is not prevalent in the context of a single Indonesian school or class. This lack of cultural fit accounts for the widespread usage in Indonesian of the loan word 'bullying', rather than the adoption of some Indonesian word to express this concept.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that bullying is common in Indonesia and does have negative impacts on Indonesian students. Several estimates of the proportion of students who have been bullied seems to be about 20%, based on the work of a number of authors in different locations in Indonesia (see, for instance, [14], but the

figure has been reported to be much higher (see, for example, [15], who report up to 49% of students they surveyed reported being bullied). Our research indicates that about a third of the children studied had experienced some form of bullying, using the problematic western definition of this behavior. The majority of this was verbal, but a significant part of the reported behavior was social in nature, and involved exclusion or avoidance, for example. It should be noted, however, that anti-bullying programs have not been very successful. These and other authors working on similar topics acknowledge the need for culturally tailored programs and the difficulty of stopping a social behavior that is considered normal and acceptable.

### 1.1 Bullying in Indonesia

The Indonesian language has no term for 'bullying' in Indonesian, although recently *perundungan* has begun to be used. The root of this term *rundung*, means 'annoy, pester' and does not have the implication of abuse and power differential the English term 'bullying' carries. In the context of Indonesian schools and school education, bullying has not been a topic of great interest until greater attention began to be given to the phenomenon in the western research literature. As is often the case, interest in the international context has given rise to an interest among researchers in the educational and counselling sectors in Indonesia. Researchers have often sought to replicate some of the studies done in western schools that are described in the literature and trial some of the methods used to address the problem. As a result, it is difficult to identify the unique characteristics of bullying in Indonesia that are based in the cultural context and that differ significantly from bullying among school students in western countries.

Bullying in western contexts is often defined as intentional aggressive behavior repeatedly directed at an individual who cannot defend him or herself. The perpetrator may be an individual or a group, and there is an unbalanced power relationship between the participants [16], [17]. The bully dominates based on greater physical strength, social status in a group, the nature of the group itself, or knowledge of the victim's personal characteristics, and it may be difficult for the victim to defend him or herself or cope with the attack [18]. Bullying may involve name calling (verbal attacks); hitting, punching, or damage to property (physical attacks); or spreading rumors and exclusion (relational and social aggression) [19]. With the expansion of the internet and social media, cyber bullying, involving bullying behavior through social media, email, instant messaging, and other interactive online platforms, has become a significant form of bullying, especially as young people spend more time online and increasingly use online platforms and applications to mediate their social interaction [20].

While almost all adults have some awareness of bullying from their own school experiences, even if they were not directly involved as a bully or a victim, the real prevalence of this phenomenon is not known. Some studies have estimated that 25%-35% of young people in western countries are involved in bullying as perpetrators, victims

or both [21], although there is a great deal of variation in this figure [21]. International surveys indicate that the prevalence of bullying is lowest in Europe and highest in the eastern Mediterranean and Africa [22]. There is comparatively little research on the prevalence of bullying or its common form in Southeast Asian countries. For Indonesia specifically, as much as 75% of the school age population reports being involved in bullying, although this figure has been criticized as an artefact of the way in which the phenomenon has been defined (see [13]). A UNICEF Indonesia study reports a more moderate but still high rate of 40%. From 2011 and 2017, The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia*) logged 26,000 cases of bullying [23]. The Indonesian Ministry of Health reports that bullying affects about 20% of Indonesian junior and senior high school students, a level that is comparable to other parts of the world.

These differences in the reported prevalence of bullying relate to how the information was obtained. Often, a translated survey tool adapted from the west has been used [24], which may or may not be valid for the Indonesian context. Another translational issue is how the behavior of interest is identified and explained to respondents, including students who may have experienced it. The terms 'bully' and 'bullying' are widely used in Indonesia as loan words, it is not clear what teachers, educational administrators, parents and students understand the term to mean. As a result, it is likely that many instances of bullying are overreported because they take the form of a specific behavior or action on the part of a student but are not associated with the feeling of being bullied or of bullying by the individuals involved. In other cases, underreporting may occur because behavior that should be counted as bullying based on the emotions generated in those involved is not adequately described by the translated definitions of behavior that are not specific to this context. When 'bullying' is defined in policy documents relating to Indonesian schools, a translation of the standard English definition, centering on repeated action by an individual or group against a weaker student for the purpose of hurting the victim, is used.

The adoption of the loan term 'bullying' brings with it a description of actions that might constitute bullying among western children in western schools. Indonesian teachers and administrators have frequently struggled to implement anti-bullying strategies that are in use in other countries (generally the English-speaking nations) and that are reported in the scholarly literature. These programs have been introduced into the Indonesian context by academics and promoted by the education authorities at various levels of government in consultation with local universities [25]. However, at present, very little attention has been paid in Indonesia to the contextual aspects of bullying, including the central issue of what constitutes normal social behavior among children at various ages. It has largely been assumed by Indonesian researchers and educators that the anti-bullying strategies developed in western school settings will be just as applicable and potentially successful in any other context.

## 1.2 Social Behavior in Indonesia

Indonesian society is group oriented, and high conformity is an expected and desired social norm. School children, for example, are part of a grade level cohort, and indi-

viduals are expected to get along, participate, and be a part of the group. Refusal to participate or associate with others in one's peer group is considered antisocial and is viewed very negatively in children, who are trained from a young age against these anti-social tendencies. The desired behavior is replicated by adults in their own social circles. Individuals tend to have a highly developed sense of appropriate social behavior and tend to be very critical of non-conformity. Most Indonesians feel it is very important to be part of whatever social groups they find themselves in and will usually adjust their behavior in order to fit in. This is a situation that leads to a form of bullying that is also seen in other Asian societies that prize social conformity and fitting in. The nature of the resultant bullying may be quite different from that usually observed in western countries. This characteristic style of bullying has been discussed much less frequently in the literature about bullying as a factor in the experience of children and young people [26].

Some of the research on the nature of bullying in other Asian cultures has relevance for Indonesia. [27], in an analysis of bullying in Japan, notes that it is often good students (as opposed to problem students) who engage in bullying, and group bullying is the norm. It is usually relational and verbal and occurs within friendship groups. The author further attributes bullying to school and contextual factors, rather than individual characteristics of the bully and victim [27]. This description fits the Indonesian setting as well, where contextual factors also play an important role.

The group experience is stressed heavily in Indonesian schools, and students are members of a class that becomes part of their school identity. Activities of various kinds, including extracurricular events, are often done as a group, rather than individually. Students are expected to take part in the activities of their class does, which are also used as a measure of the school's reputation. The language used to talk about school and classmates also contributes to a tight group mentality. The term for 'classmate' in Indonesian is *teman kelas* [lit. 'friend from class']. Parents and teachers refer to a student's peers as 'friends' in ordinary conversation as well as in discussing school in more formal settings. The constant identification of other students as one's friends reinforces the need to belong and raises the social penalty for not fitting in, either intentionally or unintentionally. Bullying, in this context, often centers on behaviors that separate the individual from the group or cause them to stand out in a way perceived as negative. Use of social media has grown enormously in Indonesia in recent years [28], including among young people, and cyberbullying seems to be a significant and growing problem as well. [12], in a review of research on five South-east Asian countries including Indonesia, note this increase and also the fact that Indonesian young people rarely report cyberbullying and instead try to avoid or overcome the problem by changing their own behavior.

Bullying, which often involves verbal comments about the victim intended for force compliance with social norms and perpetrated by a group of peers, can be seen as a strategy to enforce conformity and maintain a specific social structure that includes all members of the group. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a person who will not conform in a given social setting is perceived as very disruptive and someone to be avoided, and many Indonesians are acutely uncomfortable around a person who seems unusual in their behavior. An example of this relates to eating. It is generally

considered antisocial to eat alone in Indonesia. This view is so deeply embedded in people's experience that diners seated in a restaurant will often make a ritual offer to the strangers around them to join them if they happen to receive their food sooner than people at the adjacent tables. A child, for example, who sits by him or herself to eat or who does not want to share food will often be teased and called names because of the disruption to the group dynamic that this behavior causes.

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## 2 Methods

A systematic review was undertaken to identify literature on bullying relevant to the observed contextual factors in Indonesia. The PICO (Problem-Intervention-Comparison-Outcome) approach was used to ensure unbiased, comprehensive results, using the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews as a guide [30]. The results of this review are summarized and discussed in the context of Indonesia with the aim of formulating a concept of bullying relevant to this specific context

Data was collected and analyzed from relevant articles, so that researchers found the meaning of bullying according to the Indonesian context.



**Fig. 1.** The steps for Systematic Reviews are as follows: [31]

### 3 Results and Discussion

The review of bullying and its social context in Indonesia and the west has several implications for research on this topic and the development of effective anti-bullying strategies. It is clear that an Indonesian understanding of what constitutes bullying, based not on behavior but on the feelings generated in the victim, is urgently needed. Many of the actions that are commonly understood to be bullying and that are described in the international literature are not common in Indonesia. An example of this is the escalation of teasing to physical violence. Fighting does occur among Indonesian children, and may be very serious as in the case of *tawuran*, but physical violence is less likely to reflect an intensification of a bullying incident than conflict for some end that is important to the participants. The issue is intent, not the action itself, that allows for a definition of bullying. We need to know, in other words, what types of treatment by peers make Indonesian children feel bullied (ie experience feelings of intimidation, weakness, inadequacy, and shame, for example). Whatever this treatment is should form the basis for a working definition of bullying.

Another implication of this review is that the characteristics of the bully tend to differ in Indonesian and the west. For example, in western school contexts, it is generally accepted that children who become bullies may have a need for power and control; they may lack empathy for others; they may have feelings of entitlement; they may wish to be popular among their peer group; and/or they may feel jealous or inadequate [32]. Often the children who bully are seen as having other problems in the school context. In Indonesia, however, the children most likely to bully are often those who are most socially successful and who benefit the most from the collective social environment that is the norm. Their bullying often serves to enforce social participation that is seen as beneficial to all and that replicates the ideal group dynamic where "all the chicks cheep as one." In order to address the situation and reduce or eliminate bullying in the Indonesian context, we need to recognize the dominant social norm (including which children are at the top) and accept that the goal of interaction is a dynamic that includes all members of a cohort (class, school, etc) fulfilling their appropriate social role.

Finally, the above review suggests that bullying serves a very different purpose in the Indonesian context as opposed to the west. Among western children, bullying is often viewed as a problem of an individual bully that manifests in undesirable social behavior [33]. By contrast, in Indonesia, bullying most often is intended to enforce group participation and force any child not contributing to do his or her part. It is the case, though, that adults as well as the children involved tend to agree that this participation is important. That is, the social goal of achieving a collective group dynamic is valid in the Indonesian context, but the means of achieving it (bullying those not in compliance) is not. For this reason, the western view that anti-bullying programs should be rooted in support for individual rights and restorative justice, which includes the right to express individuality without social penalty [34] does not fit the Indonesian context. The issue in bullying in Indonesian schools is not that a child or children wish to express their individuality and are not able to. Instead, the converse tends to be the case, children wish to fit into the group but do not or cannot for some



reason. A common reason noted by teachers is shyness. Children who hesitate to participate in group activities or who are hesitant to speak in front of others may be bullied because they are perceived as anti-social or standoffish. Interestingly, most parents and teachers, as well as bullies and their victims, agree that it is desirable to be a part of the group. For this reason, anti-bullying strategies for Indonesian schools must be designed with this understanding as their foundation.

## 4 Conclusion

Research results obtained from the literature review indicate that bullying in Asian cultures, which are characterized by high conformity, tends to take a different form from bullying that occurs in western environments. The difference between bullying in western schools and in Indonesia, Bullying in the western context is often defined as aggressive behavior that is intentionally and repeatedly directed at individuals who cannot defend themselves. Oppression in Indonesia is based on a cultural context that is dominated by social groups.

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