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**Breaking the Cycle of Violence and Trauma:
How Self-Awareness Mediates the Cognitive Impact of Bullying**

**Rompendo o ciclo de Violência e Trauma:
Como a Autoconsciência media o Impacto Cognitivo do Bullying**

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ABSTRACT

Bullying, just child's play? No! Who has heard the phrase: "Back in my day, this already existed, and I wasn't traumatized..."? Although it was once seen as something common that should be part of an individual's development or as something that would not cause psychological scars, it currently involves behaviors that can include repeated and intentional physical, verbal, or social aggression directed at a person or group that is in a vulnerable position and that for these reasons, has also come to be considered a crime. But would penalizing people who practice this act, even if they are children, be the best way forward? Scientific research indicates that victims of bullying often develop negative psychological effects that can last a lifetime or even be related to the development of psychopathological conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, low self-esteem, and even learning difficulties. This article reviews the literature to map some cognitive processes related to bullying, reflecting, in particular, how self-awareness can mediate and directly influence how a person perceives and deals with this reality. Throughout this work, theoretical perspectives on the topic will be presented, as well as reflections on some intervention programs, anti-bullying strategies, and

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how some elements that involve self-awareness, such as self-concept, self-monitoring, self-control, self-regulation, and ethical and moral standards are involved in this process. The results indicate that how a person perceives, feels, and behaves when faced with bullying may be associated with losses in self-focus, and some dimensions of self-awareness, such as rumination, as well as higher levels of self-concept and self-esteem, may be protective elements in coping with bullying. Finally, this critical discussion is expected to promote reflections that will help construct new intervention programs that involve cognitive aspects, especially self-awareness, to, if not eradicate bullying, at least minimize its developmental impact on those involved, both victims and offenders.

Keywords: Bullying, Intervention programs, Cognitive processes, Self-awareness, Cognitive psychology.

RESUMO

Bullying, uma brincadeira de criança? Não! Quem já ouviu a frase: “Na minha época já existia isso e não fiquei traumatizado...”? Apesar de já ter sido visto como algo comum, que deveria fazer parte do desenvolvimento do indivíduo ou como algo que não provocaria marcas psicológicas, atualmente traz comportamentos que podem envolver agressão física, verbal ou social, repetida e intencional, dirigida a uma pessoa ou grupo que se encontra em uma posição de vulnerabilidade e que por essas razões, também passou a ser considerado crime. Mas, penalizar pessoas que praticam este ato, mesmo que sejam crianças, seria o melhor caminho? Pesquisas científicas apontam que as vítimas de bullying muitas vezes desenvolvem efeitos psicológicos negativos que podem perdurar por toda uma vida ou até mesmo se relacionar com o desenvolvimento de quadros psicopatológicos como depressão, transtornos de ansiedade, baixa autoestima e até mesmo dificuldades de aprendizagem. O referido artigo faz uma revisão bibliográfica, com o objetivo de mapear alguns processos cognitivos que estão relacionados ao bullying, refletindo, em especial, como a autoconsciência pode mediar e influenciar diretamente a forma como a pessoa percebe e lida com esta realidade. Ao longo deste trabalho serão apresentadas perspectivas teóricas acerca do tema, reflexões sobre alguns programas de intervenção, estratégias antibullying e de que forma alguns elementos que envolvem a autoconsciência, como o autoconceito, automonitoramento, autocontrole, autoregulação, os padrões de ética e moralidade estão envolvidos neste processo. Os resultados apontam que a forma como a pessoa percebe, sente e se comporta frente ao bullying pode estar associada a prejuízos no autofoco e algumas dimensões da autoconsciência, como por exemplo, a ruminação, assim como, níveis maiores de autoconceito e autoestima podem ser elementos protetivos no enfrentamento do bullying. Por fim, espera-se que esta discussão crítica promova reflexões que venham a auxiliar na construção de novos programas de intervenção que envolvam aspectos cognitivos, em



especial, a autoconsciência, para, se não erradicar o bullying, ao menos minimizar seu impacto desenvolvimental sobre envolvidos, tanto vítimas quanto infratores.

Palavras-chave: Bullying, Programas de intervenção, Processos cognitivos, Autoconsciência, Psicologia Cognitiva.

According to the UNESCO report (2024), it is estimated that 246 million children and adolescents suffer some type of school violence and bullying. In the survey carried out by UNICEF in partnership with the UN, with more than 100 thousand young people in 18 countries, the results showed that two-thirds of the participants have already been victims of bullying. Among LGBT+ students, the risk of being victims increases three to five times more when compared to non-LGBT+ students and the prevalence of school violence and bullying ranges from 16% to 85% of respondents (UNESCO, 2024).

Bullying is a complex psychosocial phenomenon that involves aggressive and repeated behaviors, usually directed at individuals who have conditions of greater vulnerability. In recent years, it has been noticed that the format of bullying practices has begun to express itself in different ways, as the use of technologies has expanded and facilitated cyberbullying practices. It is estimated that 5% to 21% of children and adolescents are victims of this reality, especially with regard to gender, girls have presented greater risks (UNESCO, 2024).

The impact of bullying can be devastating, affecting emotional, social, and even cognitive aspects of the victim. Victims of bullying can often develop depression, anxiety disorders, low self-esteem, and even learning disabilities. In addition, the effects of bullying can last throughout life, affecting a person's ability to form healthy relationships and their view of themselves (UNICEF, 2019).

The way an individual perceives himself, how he believes that others perceive him, and how he reacts to these perceptions can directly influence his intra and interpersonal relationships. In recent studies, cognitive psychology has been shown to be a fundamental area to understand the dynamics that involve this behavior,



especially with regard to the self-awareness of the individuals involved (Nascimento, Santos & Roazzi, 2019).

In view of this reality, it is verified that self-awareness is understood as a complex, dynamic and multifaceted process, in addition to being influenced by interaction with others, the social environment, the physical world and the Self itself (Morin, 2004). It involves the ability of the subject to pay attention to himself, in addition to how he is perceived by the other, which influences thoughts, feelings, motivations and behaviors (Nascimento, 2008).

Regarding its dimensions, authors point out some divisions: public self-consciousness is related to self-awareness focused on the subject's public image, such as behavior, gestures, attractiveness, etc.; private self-consciousness involves aspects of oneself that cannot be accessed by others, such as emotions, motives, values, etc., and social anxiety, which is related to the negative affect felt by the self when in the presence of others when being observed (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Nascimento, Santos & Roazzi, 2019). Within the dimension of private self-focus, subdimensions have been postulated: rumination, a maladaptive and automatic self-focus that would be more directly associated with the personality trait neuroticism and more present in processes involving psychopathologies, while reflection, an adaptive, flexible, and intentional self-focus, has generally been associated with openness to experience, is generally more involved in aspects involving life satisfaction, resilience or more adaptive ways of coping with life's adversities, also including better rates regarding various issues involving mental health (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999).

More recent studies point to possibilities of deficits in the cognitive system of self-awareness in practitioners and victims of school bullying, which may be related to structural failures in the functioning of self-focusing processes (Nascimento, Santos & Roazzi, 2019).

Therefore, this article aimed to critically present some theoretical perspectives involving self-awareness, as well as data and reflections on bullying, its psychological impacts, and possibilities for prevention, bringing some examples of anti-bullying programs and finally gathering information on the options of the link between self-awareness and how the individual perceives and deals with bullying



practices, to promote the development of bullying prevention strategies focusing on cognitive processes.

Understanding Bullying and Cyberbullying

Bullying is a form of aggression in which one or more individuals threaten others physically, psychologically, and/or sexually repeatedly for a set period (Bessa et al., 2023). According to UNESCO (2024), bullying is defined as aggressive and unwanted behavior among school-age children that usually involves a real or perceived power imbalance. In addition to being considered violence, it is characterized by a behavioral pattern that generates negative impacts on the lives of all those involved (victims, aggressors, or witnesses).

Among the characteristics of bullying, it is possible to say that it takes on two variants: direct and indirect. In direct bullying, the aggressor directly affects his victims with the use of inappropriate nicknames, offenses, humiliation, cursing, and threats, and can physically and even sexually assault them. The victim may have their belongings damaged or stolen or even be forced to pay the aggressors' expenses or do their school activities. Indirect bullying, in turn, comprises actions that aim to exclude and ignore the victim and spread rumors, lies, and defamatory and humiliating rumors in an attempt to socially denigrate the victim's image (Aguiar & Barrera, 2017). In addition, it is common for victims to have various feelings such as fear, shame, guilt, or confusion, which can generate difficulty in asking for help; in situations where this violence occurs, teachers, parents, or guardians can ignore many victims. In addition, in several situations, bullying practices can be perceived as normal in development or as part of the discipline (UNESCO, 2024).

According to Olweus (1993), its definition comprises three fundamental conditions associated with aggressive behavior: 1) the repeated pattern of physical or psychological intimidation over time; 2) the intentionality of this behavior (causing discomfort and gaining control over another person) and, 3) the imbalance of physical or psychological power between the perpetrator and the victim (with the bully, the aggressor, perceived as the strongest). Therefore, bullying is considered



a form of complex interpersonal aggression, which has different forms and functions and is manifested by different relational patterns (Gouveia, Leal & Cardoso 2017).

Studies on the phenomenon emerged from Dan Olweus, at the University of Bergen, in Europe, in 1982, after identifying that three adolescents who committed suicide suffered from experiencing school bullying. A survey conducted in Australia revealed that one in ten students was involved in bullying (Rigby & Slee, 1991). Two years later, in Norway, Olweus (1993) pointed out the involvement with bullying of one out of every seven students. In Portugal, the findings of Lourenço, Pereira, Paiva, and Gebara (2009) demonstrated a high prevalence of bullying, with 36.4% of student victims being identified respectively (Oliboni, 2019). In Brazil, the topic began to be discussed in 2000, when Cléo Fante and José Augusto Pedra extensively researched the subject (Fante & Pedra, 2008 apud Nascimento, Santos & Roazzi, 2019). The study pointed out that 40.5% (Lopes, 2005) and 41% (Fante, 2005) of the students involved in bullying situations issued the alert for the seriousness of the problem in the country's schools.

Oliboni et al. (2019) carried out a study that aimed to know the prevalence and types of bullying among elementary school students through a sample of 406 students regularly enrolled between the 5th and 9th grades of seven public schools in the southern region of Brazil. Data collection occurred through the application of a self-administered questionnaire, and the results revealed that 268 (66%) of the students were involved with bullying, 195 (48%) victims, and 73 (18%) aggressors. Girls were more involved with bullying, and the places with the highest occurrence were classrooms (57.9%) and playgrounds (39.4%). The most common types were calling and cursing (58.9%) and bothering (39.7%). The results indicated the spread of school violence and the need for intersectoral interventions aimed at empowering victims of bullying.

According to Silva *et al.* (2017), bullying is considered a social and group phenomenon, in which all the behaviors of the students involved (victims, aggressors and witnesses) affect its continuity or interruption. With the adoption of intentionally hostile, covert, and repetitive behaviors, bullying involves attitudes of intimidation, persecution, exclusion, and humiliation that come from one or more



students against others without there being a justifiable reason (Olweus, 2013). The constant aggressions can last for years, bringing deleterious consequences for those involved in the short and long term (Zequinão et al., 2017).

Causes of bullying can include issues related to social and gender norms, broader structural factors, and contextual factors. Generally, the victims of school violence can be children and adolescents who experience greater vulnerabilities related to socioeconomic conditions, belonging to sexual minorities (related to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expressions), ethnic, cultural, or linguistic minorities, belonging to communities of refugees, migrants and people with physical disabilities. In addition, violent practices can occur both in the school environment (mainly recreational areas, changing rooms, bathrooms, corridors, and classrooms), in the surroundings of the school or on the way to or from school, as well as in the virtual environment (UNESCO, 2024).

A recent study, based on a literature review, aimed at analyzing the impacts and challenges of bullying in the school context, pointed out that the impacts of bullying in the school environment can have repercussions on socio-emotional skills, cyberbullying, violence and prejudice (Soprani, Foresti & Ricardo, 2024).

Due to the growing and facilitated access of people to the internet, such practices have changed; unlike traditional bullying that occurs in person, cyberbullying happens electronically on social networks, where aggressions are posted or through the sending of emails or messages. However, despite how the aggressions are carried out, the effects on their victims are similar (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

According to Calhau (2010 apud Nascimento, Santos, and Roazzi, 2019), the aggressor can be of both sexes and usually manifests little empathy, generally presenting himself as stronger than his victims, having low resistance to frustrations, struggling to adapt to norms, characterized predominantly by oppression and violence. Studies by Bullock (2002) reinforce that children who bully are generally impulsive and exert coercion on others. An investigation carried out by Silva (2016)



associating bullying and criminality found that in 12 articles of the 13 analyzed, subjects who practiced bullying during childhood and adolescence were more involved with illicit acts in adult life.

Silva *et al.* (2018) point out that *bullying* is considered a public health problem that affects social relationships, school performance, and the health of children and adolescents. Individuals who are often attacked have a higher propensity to develop anxiety disorders, depression, suicidal ideation, borderline personality traits, stomach aches, headaches, and trouble sleeping (Wolke, 2015). The most common negative impacts, referenced in the current literature, involve: anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, self-injury, loneliness, and suicide (Silva *et al.*, 2017).

Zequinão *et al.* (2017) state that the consequences of bullying involve three spheres: health, the teaching-learning process, and psychosocial development. Thus, a tendency towards poor school performance, school failure or dropout is identified in the victims, in addition to the development of depressive conditions/symptoms, social phobia, fear, generalized anxiety, self-harm, negative thoughts, low self-esteem, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation (Sampaio *et al.*, 2015).

There are also those subjects who frequent the same spaces and witness the bullying attitudes that are established among other colleagues. In a survey carried out in the Greater Aracaju region in Sergipe (Vieira, 2016), it was pointed out that although 82% of the spectators did not approve of the acts of bullying, 47.5% of the interviewees did nothing to end the aggression, which corroborates the data found by Bandeira (2012), in which 37.8% of the witnesses of bullying did not take any action, being also the largest group among the interviewees.

Soares (2016) evaluated self-image and its relationship with school bullying, describing the possible roles of participation in bullying based on the Olweus Questionnaire, adapted to the Portuguese population (Pereira, 2006). The Sociometric Scale was used to identify bullying roles according to peers'



perceptions. This study demonstrated that the most dissatisfied children were more likely to be victims of the perception of their peers.

In Brazil, it was only in 2015 that legislation was instituted to specifically address this type of violence, which is called the Program to Combat Systematic Intimidation (Bullying), by Law No. 13,185 (Brasil, 2015). There are currently 75 laws, including federal, state, and municipal, to combat bullying, which, in general, range from the absence of conduct to be taken, guidance for parents, family members, and the school community, conducting research, to conducts such as curbing acts of aggression, discrimination, humiliation and any other behavior of intimidation, embarrassment, and violence.

Law 14,811/24 instituted national measures to protect children and adolescents against violence in educational establishments or similar, also providing for the National Policy for Preventing and Combating Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, criminalizing the practice of bullying and cyberbullying by defining the conduct of systematic intimidation (which can be psychological or physical), through acts of intimidation, humiliation or discrimination or moral, verbal, social, material or virtual actions, with a fine if the conduct does not constitute a more serious crime. In cases of systematic virtual intimidation, also called cyberbullying, if the conduct is carried out through social networks, applications, computer networks, online games, or any other digital means or transmitted in real-time, the penalty will be imprisonment from 2 to 4 years, and a fine if the act does not constitute a more serious crime.

A complex issue that has generated discussions involves the fact that a crime can be committed regardless of age; that is, what was once associated with child's play has come to be understood as a criminal act. The law is also classified as a heinous crime (which does not accept bail), and the sentence must be served in a closed regime (Brasil, 2024).

From this law, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent also received changes by establishing that educational establishments and similar, private or



public, must require and keep updated the criminal record certificates of all employees every six months. It also includes article 244-C to the ECA, stating that the mother, father, or guardian may be imprisoned if they do not report a child's or adolescent's disappearance to the public authorities (Brasil, 2024).

In addition, Law 14,811/24 also includes in the Heinous Crimes Law the recruitment, agency, internment, or coercion of minors for pornographic records or recordings; displaying or carrying out digital transmission of child pornography; possession, purchase, or storage of child pornography; trafficking of minors; instigation or inducement to self-harm or suicide of any person by virtual means (Brasil, 2024).

Rodrigues (2024) carried out a literature review, the objective of which was to analyze virtual and digital crimes and their aspects, as well as to have the current legislation on the subject and the penalty for these crimes. The results pointed out that Brazilian legislation seeks to adapt to the challenges of the digital age, tries to advance, especially in the fight against cybercrimes and *fake news*, and that it was a legislative evolution, Law 14.811 of 2024 that added article 146-A to the Penal Code, typifying the practice of the crime of bullying and cyberbullying, aiming to amplify the protection from hate attacks, among other crimes committed in the virtual sphere and that violate personality rights. But is punishing those who practice this act the best way?

Anti-bullying and cyberbullying proposals

According to Craig *et al.* (2009 apud Silva *et al.*, 2017), the literature shows that interventions have been carried out in many countries, but few have had positive effects. According to Beck's (2014) cognitive model, which understands the subject from the relationship between thought, emotion, and behavior, it is perceived that in the face of the bullying phenomenon, strategies involving psychoeducation help in the development of knowledge and construction of strategies to face the problems related to this reality. Learning new skills can change beliefs and enable



new cognitions, changes in mood, and greater behavioral control are possible. Psychoeducation can be an interesting tool to prevent bullying and can be carried out through games, play, dynamics, and dialogue circles.

More recent studies indicate that strategies to prevent and cope with bullying must involve preventive and educational actions, school and moral engagement, greater investment in teacher training, and new ways of building public policies, mainly reflecting critically and reflectively what is in Brazilian legislation. Thinking of ways to make new paths that promote a more inclusive and safe school environment is necessary. Dealing with this reality in the school context requires joint work involving educators, school authorities, students, and guardians (Soprani, Foresti, & Ricardo, 2024).

Aiming to contribute to the improvement of interpersonal relationships and awareness of 3rd, 4th, and 5th-grade students of a school in the Municipal Education Network of the city of Mariana, Teixeira (2018) identified that 30.6% were targets of bullying, 52% of perpetrators and 90% spectators. In the 3rd and 4th years, the most frequent type of bullying was physical, and in the 5th years, it was verbal bullying. In addition, the playground with the highest occurrence of aggression was the playground, followed by the classroom. After applying an intervention proposal, it was found that 69% of the sample showed great satisfaction with the project, and 30.8% agreed that after the project, the school environment changed, with better interpersonal relationships. As a result of this research, three booklets were prepared on bullying, aimed at the school, students, and families. To inform, raise awareness, and propose strategies for each audience to recognize, prevent, and combat bullying. The project resulted in greater knowledge on the part of the students about the bullying theme and the fact that the strategies used were well accepted and capable of sensitizing the students.

The study by Silva *et al.* (2018) conducted a literature review with a meta-analysis verifying whether social skills interventions would reduce victimization and/or aggression by *bullying*. The results indicated the effects of interventions on social skills in reducing aggression and victimization but at non-significant levels. The study included only case-control studies focusing on school bullying and without a time frame. The methodological quality of the investigations was evaluated using



the SIGN checklist. In total, 18 articles made up the corpus of analysis of the review, and all were assessed as having high methodological quality. The interventions in the reviewed studies were subdivided into four categories: multidimensional or school-wide, social skills training, curricular, and computerized. The review showed that most published articles are in Psychology, Education, and Health, with ages ranging from 7 to 15 years old for both sexes. Most of the interventions (63.1%) were developed in 10 sessions or less, with a prevalence of the group format (89.9%), and the teachers were the professionals responsible for conducting most of the intervention activities planned in the studies (72.2%). The research also concluded that interventions in social skills can be more effective if developed in conjunction with others involving various situations, contexts, and subjects involved in *bullying*, such as school staff and family.

Statistically, the average reduction in bullying in different sociocultural realities is 20%. In general, interventions with longer durations, which go beyond individual approaches, which include students' families and are developed by intersectoral or multi-professional teams, are more effective. In addition to these aspects, the following are fundamental: teacher training, awareness of the phenomenon, and individual and/or collective support for students involved in this type of violence. It was evident that the most effective interventions are based on the student's social, educational, family, and individual dimensions, mainly because it is evaluated that they should be differentiated according to contexts and cultures (Freire, 2012).

Research has pointed out the importance of anti-bullying programs working with changes in empathetic and moral repertoires, in which victims and witnesses would benefit and create mutual support networks. This study related maternal and paternal parenting styles and practices with the behavior of aggressor, victim, and witness of bullying and empathy in schoolchildren. It evaluated the effectiveness of a Moral Behavior Program (PCM) developed by Gomide (2010) in reducing school bullying. The results pointed to the existence of correlations between paternal parenting practices and victimization by bullying in girls and witness behavior in boys. Regarding PCM, the results showed a significant reduction in bullying behaviors in aggressors, victims, and witnesses and increased levels of empathy



for aggressors, victims, and witnesses after the intervention. The study suggested that programs based on prosocial behaviors, such as making friends, kindness, politeness, self-control, emotional expressiveness, assertiveness, and interpersonal problem-solving, can be more effective in curbing bullying, combined with guidance programs for parents, teachers, and the school community, helping to combat bullying (Barros, 2019).

Given the above, dealing with a complex phenomenon such as bullying requires well-planned strategies and expanded persistent and continuous actions. Most of the proposals focus on works related more to social and relational skills, but a certain lack of studies is perceived in the more cognitive aspects. Currently, there are significant advances in the development of strategies that seek to reduce bullying, mainly based on educational practices; however, with the advent of Law No. 14,811/24, which brings a context of punishment and criminalization, it seems that the situation has entered a more delicate territory, which can change the direction of interventions. Therefore, it is still necessary to conduct new research to evaluate the effectiveness of dealing with such a reality that challenges the entire community daily.

Psychological aspects and the relationship between Self-Awareness and Bullying

As seen earlier, bullying can generate several psychological impacts, influencing the development of psychic suffering, greater anxiety, depression, social isolation, low self-esteem, suicidal behavior (Grizorti, Leal & Melo, 2024), concern in controlling emotions, alert behavior, eating disorders, sleep difficulties, insecurity, difficulty building and remaining in interpersonal relationships, low self-esteem, stress, a sense of insufficiency, and negative feelings about oneself and the world (Fonseca & Flausino, 2024).

Each individual will seek different cognitive strategies to deal with other thoughts and feelings, which also involve cognitive processes that are usually intertwined, including self-awareness.



Self-awareness research emerged in contemporary psychological studies related to Duval and Wicklund's (1972) Theory of Objective Self-Awareness, a theoretical model that defines self-awareness as attention paid to the self, that is, as paying attention to oneself. The authors describe that its development occurs from an organizational dynamic, in which the *self* automatically compares current self-contents in the stream of consciousness with internalized patterns of correction (such as what is right/wrong), transiting between the two instances (the real self and the ideal self) that can result in pleasurable affect or anxiety, whose content and intensity will guide future attentional focuses (Nascimento, 2008).

In the context of bullying, self-awareness plays a crucial role in mediating the psychological processes involved, both for the victim and the aggressor. For the victim, the experience of being bullied can trigger a process of heightened self-awareness, where the individual begins to compare their *real self* with the *ideal self*, often confronting patterns of social acceptance and internalized norms about what is considered "normal" or "appropriate." Suppose bullying results in a departure from the *ideal self*. In that case, the victim may experience feelings of shame, anxiety, or inadequacy, which further increases their attention focused on themselves and how others perceive them. This anxiety generated by the discrepancy between the two selves can lead to a cycle of self-criticism and negative feelings, affecting the victim's emotional and social well-being.

For the abuser, self-awareness can also influence their behavior. Depending on how the bully internalizes social standards and their perceptions of themselves, they may perceive bullying as a way to reinforce their *ideal self*, feeling superior or more powerful than the victim. In this case, self-awareness may not induce feelings of anxiety but rather of satisfaction or pleasure due to the confirmation of an idealized image of oneself (such as the "dominant" or "popular"). However, if there is a discrepancy between the *real self* and the *ideal self* of the aggressor, as in the case of an internal conflict about their behaviors, this could also generate feelings of guilt or discomfort, which could modify their actions.

Thus, self-awareness is perceived as an important mediator in processes related to bullying since both the victim and the aggressor compare their internal and external experiences with internalized patterns of acceptance and judgment,



which can result in different emotional and behavioral responses. The emotional impact of bullying, for example, can be intensified by the anxiety that arises from these comparisons between the *real self* and the *ideal self*, influencing how people behave towards each other and how they deal with their own emotions during or after the experience.

According to Morin (2006), self-awareness develops complexly, revealing a state in which the individual actively identifies, processes, and stores information about the self. It models thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and self-concept in specific ways in its psychological, psychosocial, more general, and cognitive aspects. It depends on self-representational processes based on different modalities of cognitive coding (Paivio, 2007), transforming the self into a privileged source of self-knowledge (Nascimento, 2008).

According to Nascimento et al. (2019), the experience of being the target of bullying can be a highly impactful event for the development of self-awareness, as it involves the constant identification and processing of information about oneself concerning others. Bullying often leads the victim to negatively evaluate their *self*, especially when compared to social standards and ideals of acceptance (such as appearance, behavior, or abilities). In this process, the victim may internalize the idea that something is wrong with them, directly affecting their self-concept. Self-awareness, when focused on this information processing, can result in feelings of inadequacy, shame, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Bullying can also be a reflection of the aggressor's process of self-awareness. Self-awareness involves a constant evaluation and modulation of the *self*. In the case of the aggressor, this can occur through a search for the affirmation of power, status, or control. The bully may develop a self-concept in which aggression and bullying are ways to validate their identity or to reinforce an image of superiority. In this sense, bullying can be a behavior that the bully adopts to deal with his insecurity or to strengthen a *self-ideal* in which he sees himself as dominant, popular, or socially successful. In addition, the aggressor can process the information about his interaction with the victim in a way that minimizes the damage caused or even justifies his attitude, depending on his view of himself and his values.



Bullying can also interfere with the psychosocial development of the victim and the aggressor. Self-awareness, when influenced by social interactions (such as bullying), can modify how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. In the victim's case, the perception of being rejected or ridiculed can distort their self-concept, affecting their future social relationships. For the aggressor, interactions with the victim can reinforce a distorted view of power and control, negatively shaping their attitudes toward the other.

Therefore, self-awareness has a central role in developing self-perception and social relationships. Bullying, by influencing these processes of identification and processing of information about the *self*, can generate lasting effects on the victim's self-concept, leading to significant psychological and emotional consequences, and can also shape the behavior of the aggressor, reinforcing thought patterns that perpetuate violence.

Morin (2004) states that self-awareness presents three primordial sources for its triggering and maintenance in time: the social environment, the physical environment, and the self itself. The social environment provides four triggering mechanisms: Initial Face-to-Face Communication; Reflected reviews or self-relevant comments that the individual receives from others; A mechanism of social comparison that leads to Perspective Taking, where the individual sees himself as he is likely to be seen by others; and Audiences or the presence of other people observing the self. The physical environment is the ecological dimension of self-focus; it triggers self-awareness in three ways: Objects and Structures, Reflective stimuli, Written material, and Media. Finally, the Self itself is constituted by cognitive mechanisms (self-talk and mental images) and non-cognitive mechanisms (prefrontal lobes and double sensory stimulation).

According to this perspective, it is observed that in the context of bullying, Reflected Evaluations and face-to-face communication between victim and aggressor, as well as interaction with other colleagues who may witness bullying, can intensify the process of self-focus and self-communication of those involved, with consequences for the reconstruction of self-concept. The Victim starts to perceive himself through the eyes of others, which can generate shame or insecurity. For the aggressor, this communication can strengthen a sense of power



or superiority in relation to the victim, depending on how he perceives the effect of his actions.

Bullying often involves comments from others that reinforce stigmas and criticism, leading the victim to internalize these negative evaluations of themselves. This can create a distorted perception of the self, amplifying feelings of inadequacy and social isolation. For the aggressor, positive feedback from colleagues (such as approval or laughter) can validate aggressive attitudes, reinforcing continuous behavior.

Bullying is often based on a social comparison, where the victim feels inferior or inadequate to others. This process of social comparison can be intensified in bullying, with the victim constantly putting themselves at a disadvantage by perceiving themselves as someone "different" or "less acceptable". For the aggressor, this comparison mechanism can reinforce his idea of superiority by seeing the victim as "inferior".

In addition, bullying often happens in the presence of other people, which makes the experience even more painful for the victim. The victim's self-awareness becomes more intense as they see themselves being watched and judged by others, which can generate shame, anxiety, and emotional disorders. For the aggressor, the social environment can be a stimulus for maintaining aggressive behavior, primarily if he seeks approval or status before peers.

When Morin (2006) refers to the physical environment as a relevant factor for the development of self-awareness, activating the individual's attention to himself through objects, stimuli, and external representations, it is perceived that in the context of bullying, the school environment, for example, can become a space where particular "objects" (such as the closet, the bathroom or the patio) are associated with shame and humiliation. Intensifying the process of self-awareness in the victim. These places can be remembered as environments of suffering, making the victim feel constantly watched and judged. Mirrors, cameras, or even the simple reflection the victim sees in other people's reactions can act as reflective stimuli that make them negatively focus on themselves. The presence of a negative reflection on the attitudes of others can intensify feelings of inadequacy or rejection.



Bullying does not only occur in the immediate physical environment but can also be extended to the virtual one through written messages, social networks, and other forms of media. The presence of written material (derogatory comments, memes, humiliation videos) can trigger a constant reflection on the victim's image, reinforcing shame and low self-esteem. In the case of the aggressor, this material can serve as a form of validation and amplification of aggressive behavior.

The victim of bullying often engages in negative self-talk, repeating to themselves that they are not good enough or that they are not acceptable. These mental images can become fixed, creating a cycle of self-critical thoughts that intensify emotional distress. Conversely, the bully may use self-talk to justify their actions, such as "I am superior" or "they deserve it," fueling a distorted sense of power and control. In addition, bullying can activate areas of the brain associated with stress and anxiety, especially in the victim. The presence of a constant emotional and psychological threat can generate fight-or-flight reactions, hindering the victim's ability to concentrate or process situations in a balanced way. For the aggressor, these areas of the brain can be activated by feeling the reward of seeing the victim suffer, reinforcing their need to assert power over others.

Therefore, bullying is strongly related to the development of self-awareness according to the mechanisms described by Kagan (1998) and Morin (2004): the process of self-recognition, which occurs mainly in social interactions and in the reflexes that the individual receives, is directly impacted by bullying. Victims, when going through these experiences, have their perception of self shaped in a negative way, while aggressors can have their actions reinforced by social feedback that validates their behaviors.

According to Nascimento (2008), self-awareness allows for various operations that enhance environmental adaptation, such as planning, decision-making, self-control, self-conceptualization, self-evaluation, introspection, perspective-taking, and high-order cognitive processes. Self-awareness is related to many cognitive and affective processes and links to other psychological processes, such as internal experience (Magalhães & Nascimento, 2017) and mood states (Nascimento et al., 2017).



From this perspective, it is observed that bullying often causes the victim to evaluate themselves negatively and reconsider their own value. He can internalize the criticism and humiliation suffered, altering his perception of the *self* in a harmful way. This self-evaluation process can generate a distorted self-concept, leading to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and low self-esteem. Victims of bullying often engage in a cycle of repetitive, negative thoughts about their bullying experiences, constantly questioning what occurred and why it happened. This process can intensify emotional pain, increase anxiety, and generate difficulties in social and emotional adaptation. Bullying can force the victim to constantly put themselves in the shoes of the bully or others who watch them. This can lead to a distorted perception of themselves, as they start to see themselves through the eyes of others in a negative way. The bully's perspective can also increase the sense of exclusion and marginalization, impacting the victim's emotional well-being. In addition, bullying is often associated with changes in the victim's mood, with an increase in depressive, anxious, and stress symptoms. The victim's self-awareness, in this sense, directly influences their emotional state, making them more susceptible to negative experiences related to bullying.

The aggressor, on the other hand, when bullying, can use his planning and decision-making skills to choose the time and place of his action, as well as to decide who will be the victim. He can weigh in on the possible reactions of the victim and the observers, adjusting his behavior according to the desired outcome (e.g., gaining approval from peers or making the victim feel inferior). In some situations, the abuser may need self-control to moderate their behavior. The lack of this self-control can lead to more aggressive and violent behaviors, while greater self-control could prevent bullying. The process of self-awareness allows the aggressor to reflect on his actions and, depending on his perception of himself and his ability to self-regulate, he may decide not to continue with the aggressive behavior. The aggressor may be more or less attentive to the reactions of the victim and other observers. Your awareness of the emotional impact it has on the victim can be a motivation to continue bullying if it seeks to reinforce your image of power. Alternatively, becoming more attentive to the victim's suffering may lead to greater reflection on his behavior and the possibility of change.



For both the victim and the perpetrator, how others perceive the self plays an important role. The victim, when being the target of bullying, is constantly judged by others, which affects their public perception of the *self* and can generate a cycle of shame and rejection. The aggressor, in turn, can be influenced by the approval or disapproval of the social group, which can reinforce their behavior or lead them to adjust their actions depending on the reaction of others. Internally, both the victim and the bully experience the effects of bullying on their internal perceptions of the *self*. The victim may have a negative view of themselves, affected by the psychological violence of bullying. On the other hand, the aggressor may also experience an internal struggle, especially if his actions generate feelings of guilt or discomfort or, in some cases, if the aggression is a form of affirmation of his own power or identity.

Morin (2004) speculates that mental images mediate self-awareness, which favors systematic self-observation, self-evaluation, and reconstruction of self-schemata, as well as reproducing social mechanisms that generate self-awareness, such as perspective-taking. Imagination is an important process of sedimentation of a sense of self (Mead, 1934/1972). It is a rich field of phenomenological possibilities of self-experience (Shanon, 2004).

In the case of the victim of bullying, mental images play a central role in the way they process experiences of abuse and how they see themselves in relation to the social world. Bullying often leads the victim to create negative mental images of themselves, reinforcing a distorted **self-schema**. When a person is the target of bullying, they usually start to critically observe themselves, internalizing the attitudes of others (aggressors and even observers) towards themselves. This can generate a negative evaluation of the *self*, with the victim seeing themselves as inferior, inappropriate, or rejected. These mental images are reinforced by bullying and can become a perennial cycle of self-criticism, which hinders the process of social and emotional adaptation. The victim of bullying can have their self-schemes distorted and reconstructed in a negative way due to their experiences. If bullying involves public humiliation, for example, the victim may build a mental image of themselves as someone who is constantly being watched critically and negatively. This can affect your self-esteem and your ability to form healthy relationships in the future. **In**



addition, the victim of bullying often starts to put themselves in the shoes of others to understand how they are perceived, which can intensify feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. "Perspective-taking" refers to how they try to understand others' views of themselves, which can generate a distorted perception of the *self*, leading them to feel inferior or different, regardless of who they are. Just as imagination plays a crucial role in how the victim relates to their experiences. Often, the victim of bullying finds himself reliving the situations of abuse in his mind, amplifying its emotional and psychological consequences. Imagination can also create a fanciful "self-overcoming," in which the victim tries to imagine ways to cope with or escape the situation but without the chance to experience these solutions, generating a cycle of constant frustration and suffering.

The abuser may use self-observation to assess how their actions affect the victim and others around them. However, this observation can be distorted by a view of oneself as someone who is "on top" or superior, especially if there is approval or support from colleagues. This can reinforce a self-schema of superiority, in which the abuser sees himself as a dominant or influential person. The action of humiliating and attacking can contribute to the formation of a self-schema that associates its value with aggressive or dominant behaviors. Instead of cultivating healthy self-schemas, which involve empathy and respect for others, the bully may build an identity based on the idea that power over others is the key to social acceptance. While "perspective taking" is a mechanism that can help understand how others view the situation, the bully may have a distorted perspective or lack empathy. He may not notice the victim's suffering or, in some cases, even be satisfied with the humiliation of others, which reinforces his aggressive behavior. In other cases, the aggressor may try to put himself in the victim's shoes, but he does so in a distorted way, which justifies or minimizes his own actions. The aggressor can also use their imagination to justify or rationalize their actions, creating mental scenarios considered legitimate or even "necessary." This use of imagination can feed a distorted view of oneself and the impact of one's actions. The aggressor's self-experience, therefore, can be shaped by the belief that his aggressive attitude is a way to gain respect or status.



Bullying experiences can profoundly affect the sedimentation process of the *self*. The victim may begin to imagine themselves as someone less capable or deserving of respect, internalizing the violence suffered and creating a sense of identity based on exclusion and rejection. Just as for the aggressor, imagination can reinforce the idea that he is more powerful or capable of dominating others. This process of sedimentation of a *self-based* on social superiority can perpetuate bullying behavior and make it difficult to form a healthy identity.

Self-awareness is a cognitive system that allows the self to pay attention to itself and, self-monitor and self-regulate and is, therefore, a central cognitive parameter (Morin, 2004) and fundamental to the stability of the self and cognition and to psychological well-being (Jiménez, 1999). When the victim is being bullied, they are forced to constantly monitor their behavior, appearance, and actions, often to prevent further aggression. This process of over-monitoring can lead to a constant state of alertness and anxiety, which affects your ability to feel safe in your environment and to take action. The victim of bullying may begin to develop self-regulation strategies to cope with emotional distress. For example, you can try to control your emotional reactions so as not to show vulnerability or to avoid further attacks. However, this self-regulation, when excessive or inadequate, can result in emotional repression, which harms psychological well-being in the long run. This can also create a disconnect between the victim's real emotions and the behavior they feel they must adopt to protect themselves.

Based on this understanding, bullying can directly affect the stability of the victim's self. Constant exposure to humiliation and rejection can cause the victim to question their identity, worth, and self-worth. As a result, their self-awareness can become negative, with them seeing themselves as distorted and with a sense of fragility in the *self*. The victim's cognition can be affected by internalizing negative ideas about themselves, leading to difficulties in making decisions, reflecting on their experiences, and adjusting socially. The impact of bullying on the victim's psychological well-being is profound. The disconnect between *self-perception* and social reality can lead to problems such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. A lack of self-regulation and effective self-monitoring can exacerbate these problems, making emotional recovery more difficult.



The bully, especially if their behavior is not stopped or challenged, may have difficulties in self-monitoring their actions ethically or empathetically. In some cases, he may not realize the damage he causes to the victim, or he may rationalize his actions to gain power or acceptance. The aggressor's self-regulation may be absent or deficient, which allows the perpetuation of aggressive behavior. The bully may be involved in a distorted process of constructing their identity. He may use aggression to assert power or control, which may be a way to deal with inner insecurities or maintain an image of himself as superior. The lack of healthier self-awareness can result in a distorted view of the *self*, which relies on domination over others to feel valid or respected.

Impairments in the aggressor's self-awareness can negatively affect their psychological well-being. Aggressive behavior may reflect a lack of emotional self-regulation, and it may be acting out of unresolved frustrations or insecurities. If the abuser does not develop healthy self-awareness, it can lead to difficulties in forming constructive social relationships, empathy problems, and even the worsening of violent behaviors.

According to Nascimento (2008), the routes of the development of the self are subject to the cultural organization, mediated by the various social institutions that constitute the symbolic ambiance of self-organizing processes. According to Duval and Wicklund (1972) and Duval, Silvia, and Lalwani (2001), the trajectory of the construction of the self involves the internalization of hierarchically organized standards of selective reference, constantly updated in the flow of consciousness and some more than others due to the force of pressure from the social contexts in which the self most continuously transits.

Given the above, it is perceived that the victim of bullying often internalizes the social standards and values that society or their social group transmits. If society or the group values certain behaviors, appearances, or characteristics (such as aesthetic or popularity standards), the victim may feel pressured to live up to those standards. When the victim is bullied, this pressure is intensified, and the victim may negatively perceive themselves due to the discrepancy between who they are and the patterns that have been internalized. In addition, the dynamics of bullying can reinforce the idea that individuals must conform to social norms or suffer the



consequences. The victim may then see themselves as someone who has "failed" to meet these norms and, as a result, be marginalized or stigmatized. The "pressure of the social context," as described by Duval and Wicklund (1972), influences the victim to perceive himself negatively, often feeling inadequate or inferior.

The aggressor, in turn, is also subject to cultural organization and social standards. Still, in this case, he may internalize norms that promote dominant or aggressive behaviors to assert power or status. In social contexts, such as schools, groups of friends, or family, bullying behaviors can be considered as a way of gaining authority or even as a way of adapting to the group if bullying is a socialized norm in that environment. Internalizing these hierarchical patterns of "superiority" or "control" may lead the aggressor to justify his actions as a legitimate way to gain respect or power within his social context. This is reinforced by the symbolic ambiance that sometimes validates the aggressive behavior, making it part of the aggressor's identity and the way he sees himself (or wants to be seen) by others.

Bullying can be seen as a product of societal pressures, in which aggressive behavior is often validated within specific contexts (e.g., among peers who incite or condone bullying). Both the victim and the aggressor internalize this behavior. The victim, when being the target of bullying, may internalize the idea that they do not meet social standards or that they deserve to be treated inferiorly, negatively affecting their self-esteem and self-confidence. Reference to hierarchically organized patterns of "correctness" and "acceptance" in the social context may help explain how bullying is often related to competition for status or acceptance within social groups. The aggressor may perceive bullying as asserting their social or hierarchical position. At the same time, the victim is relegated to a position of inferiority, which reinforces the dynamics of power and control.

The dynamics of bullying can be seen as a constant battle to align the individual's identity with the cultural and social standards that surround them. The victim of bullying, when confronted with the standards imposed by society (whether in terms of appearance, behavior, or social skills), may feel increasingly distant from these standards, generating an internal conflict. On the other hand, by internalizing the norms of power or domination, the aggressor may continue to operate within a cycle of asserting control over others. As described by Duval and Wicklund (1972),



this internalization of hierarchical patterns is a determining factor for perpetuating bullying, as both the victim and the aggressor are influenced by social norms that shape their actions and perceptions. Social pressure and the constant updating of norms and expectations generate an environment where bullying can be seen as a way to align the *self* with cultural standards, either by exclusion (in the case of the victim) or by the assertion of power (in the case of the aggressor).

From an empirical approach to the elaboration of instruments and techniques of factor analysis, three dimensions of self-awareness were identified, namely, public self-awareness, private self-awareness, and social anxiety (Fenigstein et al. (1975), each of them with a potential differential impact for the outbreak of bullying behaviors.

It is perceived that when a person is the target of bullying, their public self-awareness is often affected. The victim becomes excessively concerned with the image they are projecting to others, usually feeling ashamed or insecure. She may fear being viewed in a negative way, which can intensify emotional and psychological distress. Bullying, when occurring in public, makes this concern more intense, as the victim feels that his image is constantly being evaluated and criticized by others. For the bully, bullying can be a way to validate their social position or gain acceptance within a group, especially if the aggressive behavior is approved or supported by peers. The need to be dominant in front of others can motivate the aggressor to continue the attacks.

The victim of bullying may have difficulty integrating their intimate feelings of pain and humiliation with their public identity. This internal conflict can generate a sense of mismatch between what they feel internally and how others perceive them externally. Additionally, the experience of bullying can lead to excessive rumination and introspection, exacerbating anxiety and psychological distress. The victim's suffering can be more internalized, being a constant struggle between their private emotions and their public perception of themselves. The abuser may, in some cases, have a distorted internal perception of themselves, often motivated by insecurities or personal trauma. Bullying can be a way of dealing with your internal difficulties, trying to reassert your private identity about a social standard of power or control. Awareness of the impact of their actions on the other may not be fully



accessed by the aggressor's private self-awareness, especially if they lack empathy or understanding of their emotions. Thus, the bully may internalize a view of themselves as strong and dominant, which can drive aggressive behavior.

The victim of bullying tends to experience elevated levels of social anxiety since bullying often occurs in public. The victim feels observed and judged negatively by others, which generates a sense of vulnerability. She may anticipate social events for fear of being the target of further aggression, which aggravates her anxiety and can lead to a cycle of social avoidance. Social anxiety increases discomfort in environments where they feel insecure, which can affect their ability to integrate socially or develop healthy relationships. While social anxiety is often associated with the victim, it can also be present in the bully, mainly if they use bullying as a way to cope with their insecurity. The abuser's social anxiety can be a motivation for their aggressive behavior, as they may try to reassert their status or social position through controlling or humiliating others. The bully may feel the need to dominate the other to reduce their anxiety and feel accepted or respected in the group.

For Trapnell and Campbell (1999), the willingness to focus attention on oneself can be motivated both by more neurotic needs (such as anxiety) and by more purely epistemic needs (such as curiosity), which leads to the understanding that the possible motivational aspects that may be involved in self-awareness are not differentiated. The authors postulated that rumination would be more directly associated with the personality trait neuroticism, while reflection would be more associated with openness to experience.

Based on this theoretical construction, it is perceived that the victim of bullying can find himself trapped in a cycle of rumination, constantly reliving and reflecting on the experiences of bullying. This can aggravate their anxiety and increase psychological suffering, as they can become fixated on the aggressions suffered, derogatory comments, or the feeling of exclusion. This ruminative cycle can make it more difficult for the victim to recover, as the constant focus on their insecurities and bullying perpetuates emotional pain. Victims with higher neuroticism may be more likely to ruminate on negative events, exacerbating their perception of vulnerability and social rejection. Neuroticism can make it difficult for



the victim to adapt to the school or social environment, as they may feel constantly threatened and unable to distance themselves from bullying emotionally.

Individuals with a greater tendency to reflect may be better able to process bullying experiences adaptively. While bullying still causes pain, these individuals may be better able to seek support, learn from experiences, and develop a more resilient sense of self. Reflection can help the victim analyze what happened more detachedly, avoiding fixation on negative thoughts and seeking strategies to deal with the situation more effectively. The aggressor, in turn, may also have a psychological profile in which reflection leads to an understanding of the impact of his actions on others. If the bully becomes more reflective, they may better perceive the emotional consequences of bullying on the victim and ultimately rethink their behavior. However, if the bully is more focused on rumination (and if they also exhibit traits of neuroticism), they may engage in a cycle of negativity and insecurity, which can increase their propensity to act aggressively as a way to cope with their emotional difficulties.

Suppose the victim of bullying is motivated by neurotic needs (such as anxiety). In that case, they may find themselves constantly concerned about others' perception of them, especially in social contexts where bullying occurs. This can intensify the suffering, as she will be continually vigilant, waiting for new attacks or judgments. In cases of repeated bullying, social anxiety can become a significant obstacle for the victim, who sees themselves as a potential target of criticism or exclusion. The aggressor, in turn, can act aggressively for various reasons, including the need for social validation and the search for control. If the bully is motivated by a more neurotic need (for social insecurity or anxiety), they may use bullying as a way to assert themselves or minimize their insecurities. However, suppose the abuser is driven to explore his reflective self-focus and more motivated by an epistemic curiosity. In that case, he may reach a more comprehensive level of how he is habituated to manipulating social dynamics, possibly without fully understanding the emotional impact of his actions.

About private self-awareness (APR), Turner, Scheier, Carver, and Ickes (1978) found that APR was positively associated with reflective thinking, self-monitoring, and emotionality and negatively associated with self-esteem. Trapnell



and Campbell (1999) suggested the association of APR with neuroticism, low clarity of self-concept (Campbell et al., 1996), and indicators of psychopathology (Jostes, Pook & Florin, 1999).

The self's ability to self-reflect can distort our perceptions of the world, lead us to draw inaccurate conclusions about ourselves and others, and therefore make bad decisions based on misinformation. It instills high doses of personal suffering in the form of depression, anxiety, anger, envy, and other negative self-focusing emotions that course with a rumination on one's past or an unfortunate anticipated future (Nascimento, 2008; Leary, 2004). Morin (2004) points out that self-humiliating people (with high scores in Self-rumination) remain anxious in the focus of attention on harmful or problematic aspects of the self and become more subject to dysfunctional states (Nascimento, 2008).

Murphy and Eisenberg (1997) found that children with lower self-regulation report conflict with more anger than others, and they enacted more hostile responses to anger. Shame and guilt have been linked to various interpersonal and personal outcomes. Guilt is the most adaptive response to sin and failure. People who feel guilt for their destructive behaviors tend to be motivated in a constructive, future-oriented direction—confessing, apologizing, or somehow undoing the damage that has been done. In contrast, shame carries hidden psychological and social costs. Self-control strengthens and is strengthened by good, stable relationships. Avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles are negatively correlated with self-control.

Self-control can be considered the center of psychological adjustment. It facilitates the ability to step outside one's point of view and understand someone else's concerns. According to Tice and Baumeister (1997), people with high self-control showed fewer impulse control problems. According to Boone and Baumeister (2018), people with poor self-control report a remarkable variety of unfortunate outcomes in schoolwork, social life, adaptation, and emotional patterns. According to Sofia and Cruz (2015), self-control is essential in regulating aggression in sports. Individuals with low self-control tend to have more ruminative thoughts and aggressive behaviors, especially male athletes.



Evidence shows that moral identity can motivate people to engage in prosocial behaviors and avoid antisocial behaviors. According to Hardy, Bean, and Olsen (2015), moral identity has been positively associated with prosocial behaviors and negatively linked to antisocial ones. For antisocial behavior, the interaction between moral identity and moral disengagement predicted aggression, while the interaction between moral identity and self-regulation significantly predicted aggression and rule-breaking. Thus, moral identity can cushion against the maladaptive effects of high moral disengagement and low self-regulation.

Antisocial behavior is detrimental to relationships, communities, and society, as well as favoring low self-esteem, higher levels of aggression, anxiety, and depression, higher rates of alcohol use and sexual risk (Hardy et al. 2012; 2013; 2014), and bullying (Thornberg and Jungert 2013).

A study by Nascimento, Santos, and Roazzi (2019) pointed out that dispositional self-awareness was implicated in a deficit in the core of the cognitive system of practitioners and victims of school bullying, demonstrating structural flaws in the functioning of self-focusing processes due to possibly, developmental inconstancies in the environmental availability of self-focusing stimuli. The aggressors showed a tendency to emit behaviors that are more referenced in information assimilated from the external environment where, among other factors, the current culture of abuse in interpersonal relationships did not pass through the reflective sieve supported by the correction patterns of the research subjects (Nascimento, 2008), making it difficult for them to change cognitively and behaviorally. 2005), strengthening the cycle of violence.

With regard to passive victims, they directed the focus of attention to the environment, indeed towards the perpetrators of bullying practices in an attempt to avoid (Fante & Pedra, 2008), being chronically absent from states of objective self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), which favored them to be less aware of internal self-aspects, and, consequently, cognitive coping resources. The inability to self-focus found in the aggressor victims, characterized by the practice of reactive bullying according to Fante and Pedra (2008), resulted in a behavior rooted in patterns of violence instead of creative self-exploration, that is, the victims progressively incorporated aggressor responses and became a posteriori elements



of the perpetuation of the cycle of violence, supported by a deficient dynamic of self-focusing states. The study also showed that the older the practitioners of proactive bullying become, the stronger their patterns of behavior associated with violence become, and the older the ages of the victims, the more submissive the passive group becomes and the more aggressive the practitioners of reactive bullying end up being, due to the decrease in the tendency to self-focus. The same examination showed that male students in both grades were more likely to practice school bullying and consecutively presented low levels of attention.

It is perceived that impairments in self-awareness influence the perception of aggressors regarding their behaviors, preventing them from questioning their attitudes and perceiving the damage caused to the victims. The absence of this critical reflection on their actions fuels violence and the perpetuation of the cycle of aggression since the aggressor continues to act destructively without internalizing moral standards of correction. This reinforces aggressive behavior and contributes to incorporating aggressive responses over time. Passive victims of bullying, according to the study, have a deficit in states of objective self-awareness; that is, they have difficulties focusing attention on internal self-aspects, such as their emotions and cognitive coping resources. Instead, victims direct their focus to the external environment and to the aggressors, often in an attempt to avoid conflict (escape from bullying). This can lead to a lack of self-exploration and proper coping strategies.

The deficit of self-focus in victims of bullying can make them more susceptible to passivity and lack of emotional and cognitive resources to deal with aggression. Lack of self-awareness can make it difficult for the victim to build a healthy self-concept and their perception of their abilities to cope with bullying, perpetuating submission and vulnerability. This process can increase the difficulty of resistance of victims and make it more difficult for them to escape the cycle of aggression.

The study also reveals that as perpetrators age, their violent behavior patterns become stronger, and victims tend to become more submissive. This is related to the decrease in the tendency to self-focus over time, which suggests that the lack of reflection (both on the part of the aggressor and the victim) contributes



to the perpetuation of the cycle of violence. The lack of self-exploration and self-focus prevents both the perpetrators and the victims from breaking the cycle of violence and submission. In aggressors, impairments in self-awareness reflect on the perception of the consequences of their actions, which strengthens aggressive behavior. In victims, the lack of resources to face bullying contributes to passivity and non-resistance, perpetuating the cycle of aggression and suffering.

The low attentivity among boys mentioned in the study may indicate a lack of focus on the internal aspects of the self, which may contribute to aggressiveness and lack of empathy in interpersonal relationships. Boys with low attention to themselves may be more inclined to engage in aggressive behaviors and ignore the emotional consequences of their actions on victims. The difficulty of focusing attention on one's own emotions and reactions can lead to distancing from feelings of empathy and reflection on the implications of bullying.

Given the above, it is clear that to date, there is no project in Brazil that involves the entire national territory and that is specific to the diagnosis, prevention, and intervention of school bullying, as there is in other countries (Oliboni et al., 2019; Olweus, 2013). For the most part, we have the results of master's and doctoral research that aim to investigate the problem of bullying and propose prevention and intervention programs.

The World Report on the Prevention of Violence (World Health Organization, 2024) states that although countries are investing in violence prevention laws, their application is often inadequate and incompatible with the scale and severity of the problem. Therefore, we are facing a complex reality, which needs more studies and proposals for local interventions aimed at prevention and harm reduction.

There has also been a need for greater investment in intervention programs that contemplate cognitive aspects, especially self-awareness. Building strategies that help the victim get out of the rumination cycle, promoting healthy reflection on the experience, and encouraging resilience. Strategies focused on reducing anxiety and developing coping skills can be crucial for the victim to be able to process bullying experiences more adaptively and constructively. For the bully, intervention programs can focus on increasing reflection on the consequences of their actions,



developing empathy and understanding of the emotional impacts of bullying on victims. In addition, the bully can be helped to deal with their insecurities and feelings of social anxiety, which can motivate aggressive behaviors as a way to seek acceptance or social control.

Some components of self-awareness, such as self-concept, self-monitoring, self-control, self-regulation, and ethical and moral standards, are key to dealing with bullying effectively, both for victims and perpetrators. These elements can be incorporated into new intervention proposals to prevent and treat bullying, providing more effective coping methods and promoting behavioral changes.

Self-monitoring can help victims notice the signs of bullying more quickly, allowing them to react more effectively or seek support. For bullies, self-monitoring can make them more aware of the impact of their behaviors, reducing the incidence of aggression and encouraging more empathetic behaviors. Awareness programs can teach children and adolescents to become more aware of their own behaviors and their effects on others, promoting a more empathetic and respectful environment. Teaching emotional self-monitoring techniques can also help victims identify when their feelings are being negatively affected by bullying, allowing them to take preventive action.

Self-control is particularly important for dealing with the intense emotions that can arise during bullying, such as anger, frustration, sadness, and fear. It is essential to avoid impulsive reactions, such as violent retaliation or verbal aggression, which often perpetuate the cycle of bullying. For victims, emotional self-regulation can help them deal with the negative feelings caused by aggression in a more adaptive way, without internalizing the aggressions or giving in to despair. Social skills training that addresses self-control and emotional self-regulation can be valuable in reducing bullying. This includes teaching relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and conflict resolution strategies, helping victims and bullies better manage their emotions and responses in bullying situations.

Internalizing ethical standards helps victims and perpetrators understand what is morally acceptable in social interactions. For victims, this can mean strengthening assertiveness, allowing them to defend themselves without fear. For bullies, ethics education can lead them to reflect on the harm they cause and the



devastating effects of bullying on victims. Educational programs promoting respect, empathy, and solidarity are key to creating a more ethical school culture. Involving discussions about morality and ethics in the curriculum can help students develop social awareness and adopt an anti-bullying stance.

Final considerations

This article highlighted the importance of cognitive processes, especially self-awareness, in the context of the search for a scientific understanding of bullying. By exploring the different interfaces of self-awareness with self-related processes - such as self-concept, self-monitoring, self-control, self-regulation, and standards of ethics and morality (Nascimento, 2008), it was observed that these elements not only influence the perception and coping with bullying but can also act as protective or risk factors. The impact of bullying on the lives of victims and even bullies is often related to impairments in self-focus and the ability to self-regulate emotionally, as evidenced by excessive rumination and difficulty adjusting behaviors constructively. On the other hand, high levels of self-concept and self-esteem proved to be essential components in strengthening resilience in the face of situations of abuse, suggesting that the promotion of reflective self-awareness can be an effective way to cope with bullying.

In addition, the study of existing intervention strategies, combined with understanding the cognitive processes involved, provides valuable insights for constructing new anti-bullying programs. Such programs can integrate approaches that promote self-reflection, self-knowledge, and ethics, which are crucial for preventing and resolving aggressive behaviors in the school environment. Hopefully, this review will contribute to the design of more effective, self-awareness-based interventions focusing on the cognitive and emotional development of individuals, both perpetrators and victims, to create a healthier and more empathetic environment in schools.

The elements that involve self-awareness, such as self-concept, self-monitoring, self-control, self-regulation, and ethical and moral standards, are essential to dealing with bullying effectively. They directly influence the behavior of victims and perpetrators, helping to mitigate the negative impact of bullying and



promote positive change. Cognitive interventions that strengthen these aspects can empower students to deal with bullying healthily and create a more respectful and inclusive school environment. Thus, developing programs emphasizing self-awareness and ethical standards is crucial for preventing and addressing bullying.

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