

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 015

PS 027 513

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TITLE "Ijime": An Exploratory Study of a Collective Form of Bullying among Japanese Students.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Albuquerque, NM, April 15-18, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bullying; Cultural Influences; *Early Adolescents; Foreign Countries; Interviews; Junior High School Students; Junior High Schools; *Peer Relationship; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Japan

ABSTRACT

Noting that bullying has become very prevalent in Japanese schools, this exploratory interview study examined Japanese junior high school students' perceptions and experiences of bullying, or "ijime." Participating were 61 students randomly selected from two junior high schools in a small Japanese town. Subjects were asked to describe their perceptions of bullying, to talk about their experiences with bullying, and to explain the differences between bullying and fighting. Responses indicated that 60 percent of the students had experienced "ijime," either as a bully, a victim, or a witness. About 85 percent of students named indirect aggressive behaviors in their perceptions of bullying. Over 90 percent reported that only group-to-one harassment was considered "ijime." About 7 percent said that both group-to-one and one-to-one harassment were considered "ijime." All the students who had experienced "ijime" either as a bully or a victim said that their experience was a group-to-one case. The findings suggested that Japanese students were more likely than Western children to use indirect relational tactics, such as spreading nasty rumors and ignoring. Three characteristics of bullying among Japanese students may stem from Japan's social structure: (1) pressure to conform to group norms; (2) awareness of their roles in a group; and (3) use of relational aggression. (KB)

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Ijime: An Exploratory Study of a Collective Form of
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Abstract

This exploratory study examined Japanese junior high-school students' perceptions and experiences of bullying or *ijime*. *Ijime* problems are very prevalent in Japanese schools, and it has been reported that over 80% of primary and secondary students had been involved in *ijime*. The interviews revealed that, unlike Western children, Japanese children were more likely to perceive *ijime* as an indirect aggression in a group phenomenon. Also, they were more likely to use indirect (relational) tactics such as spreading nasty rumors and ignoring. The Japanese students' involvement in indirect collective bullying was related theoretically to Japan's collective social structure.

Introduction

School bullying or *ijime* problems seem much more prevalent in Japan than in Western countries. Bullying and *ijime* are defined similarly by the researchers in Japan and the West. Bullying or *ijime* occurs when a person or a group harasses another member(s) of their social group, and harassment lasts a relatively long period of time. Physical, verbal, and indirect aggression are used as means to harm others. Thus, bullying or *ijime* can take one-to-one or group-to-one forms, and physical, verbal, or indirect types in their definitions.

However, there may be some differences in children's own perceptions of what bullying or *ijime* is. This study assessed Japanese children's perceptions of the word "*ijime*".

In the Western literature on bullying, some researchers argued that there were discrepancies between children's perceptions of the word "bullying" and the scientific definition of it. Despite its scientific definition, the children tend to perceive bullying primarily as physical harassment by one stronger/bigger child against a weaker/smaller child. The study addressed that Japanese children are more likely to perceive "*ijime*" as indirect aggression by a group of children against one.

Method

61 students were randomly selected from two junior high-schools in a small town in southwest Japan.

- 21 first year students (11 boys & 10 girls, average age = 12.5)
- 22 second year students (12 boys & 10 girls, average age=13.3)
- 18 third year students (9 boys & 9 girls, average age = 14.2)

The students were asked;

- 1) to describe their perceptions of *ijime*,
- 2) to talk about their *ijime* experiences, and
- 3) to explain differences between *ijime* and fighting.

Each interview lasted about 5 to 15 minutes depending on the student's willingness to talk about his/her experiences.

Results

Ijime experience rates

36 students (60%) reported that they had experienced *ijime* as a bully, a victim, or a witness.

Ijime types

The *ijime* behaviors mentioned by each student were categorized into three types of behaviors; physical, direct verbal, and indirect. About 85% of the students named indirectly aggressive behaviors in their perceptions of *ijime* and about 80% of the students who had experienced *ijime* reported that it was in indirect type of *ijime* (Figure 1).

Ijime forms

93.3% students reported that only group-to-one harassment was considered *ijime*, and 6.7% said that both group-to-one and one-to-one harassment were considered *ijime*. All the students who had experienced *ijime* as a bully and a victim said that it was a group-to-one case. Only one student who had witnessed said that it was a one-to-one physical situation (Figure 2).

Students' Comments about Differences between *Ijime* and Fighting

- “In *ijime*, there are so many people involved, but in fighting, only the people who have a conflict between one another are involved.”
- “No one has the guts to bully someone by oneself. They can only bully someone when they are ganged-up.”
- “You don’t call it *ijime* if it is a one-to-one situation.”
- “There are reasons for fights, but there are no reasons for *ijime*.”
- “*Ijime* is serious, but fighting is just a conflict between friends.”
- “Fighting is open, but *ijime* is ‘sticky’ and hidden.”

- “There are happy endings in fighting because the people involved are friends in the first place, but there are no happy endings in *ijime*.”
- “*Ijime* lasts for a long time, but fighting doesn’t.”

Discussion

Japanese children’s tendency to engage in a collective bullying is strongly related to the structure of the society in which they live. Japan is a collective society, and in a collective society people emphasize group values over individual values. Some negative aspects of collective society may be reflected to the children’s *ijime* behaviors. Three unique characteristics of bullying among Japanese students that may stem from Japan’s social structure were 1) pressure to conform to group norms, 2) awareness of their roles in a group, and 3) use of relational aggression.

1) Pressure to conform to group norms (fear of isolation)

In a collective society, people are constantly expected to conform to group norms. This expectation can generate pressures to “be like everyone else”. Some students in the study explained that they had bullied someone because everyone else was doing it. They did not have any other reasons why they bullied their victims besides to conform to the group behaviors. These students also showed lack of guilt or remorse. They said that they thought it was okay because they were not the only one who was bullying.

2) Awareness of their roles in a group

Salmivalli et al. (1996) argue that bullying is a group process and children take on different participant roles; bully, assistant, reinforcer, outsider, and defender. Japanese children who identify themselves with their relation to a group and are much more sensitive to group actions seem to be aware of their roles and their roles’ effectiveness in a bullying situation. Some students in the study identified themselves as bullies even though they did not take an initiative in bullying.

3) Use of relational aggression

Japanese children tend to use indirect relational tactics in bullying. This may be learned from their parents. Most commonly used parental punishment techniques in Japan are; isolation of a child for a short period of time, separation from the family, and threatening a child with abandonment. These techniques are believed very effective, and they are very well modeled by the children in their peer relationships.

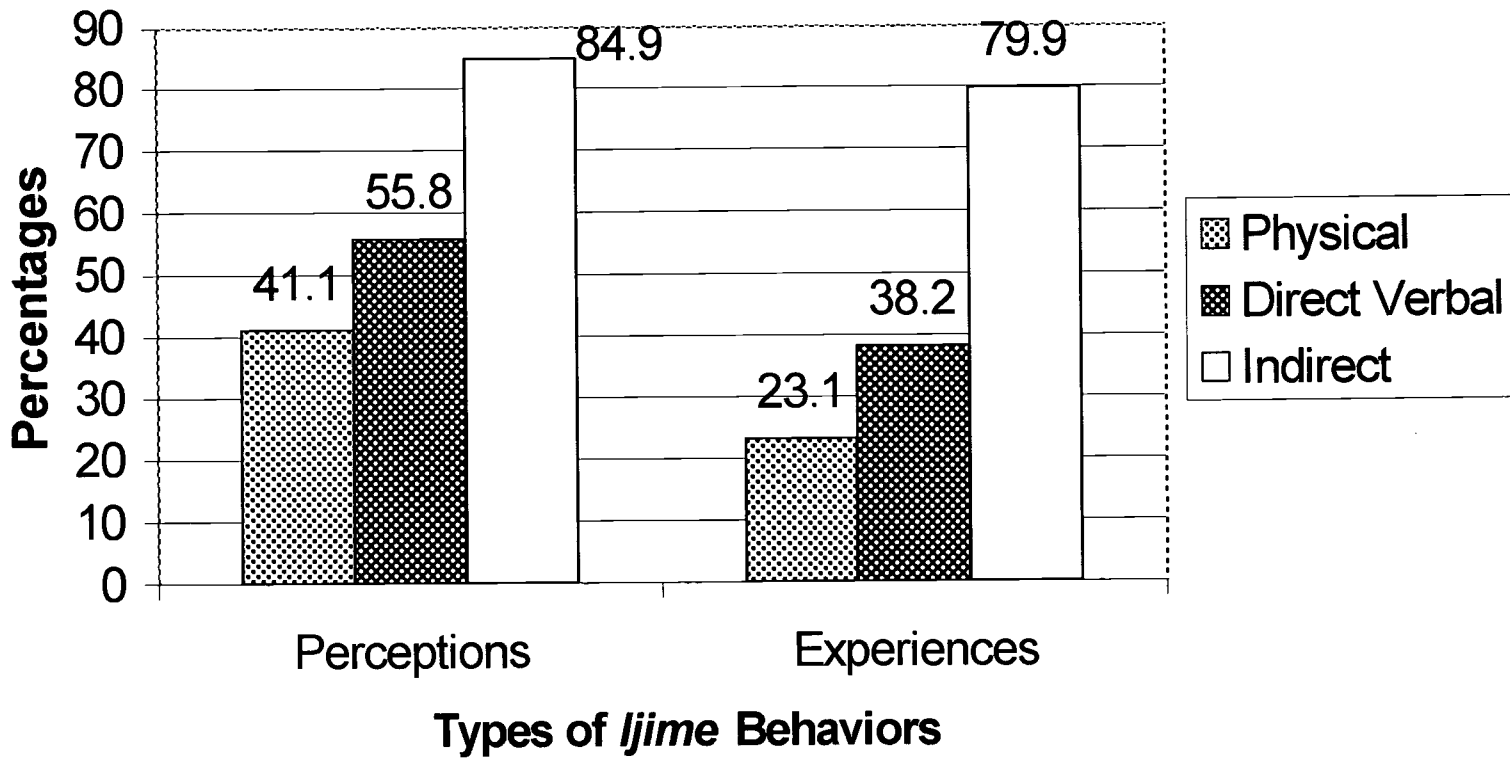


Figure 1 A comparison of perceptions and experiences of *ijime* types among Japanese students

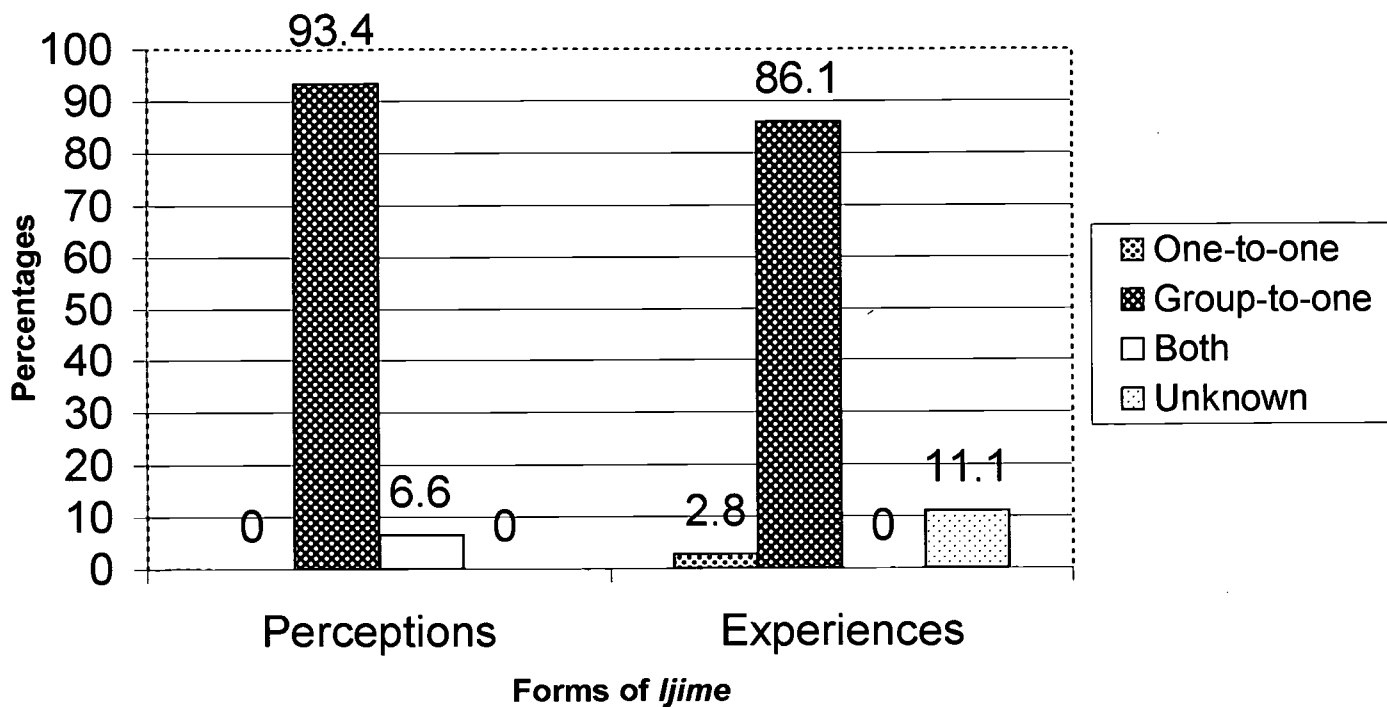


Figure 2 A comparison of perceptions and experiences of *ijime* forms among Japanese students



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