

The perceptions of youths in early adolescence concerning the role obesity plays in bullying

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Obesity has become a global pandemic that not only affects adults, but also children and adolescents. It has been found that obesity among children and adolescents has emotional, social, physical and psychological ramifications, one of which is bullying. Very little has been written on the effects obesity in adolescence has on bullying behaviour in a South African context. For this reason the researchers deemed it necessary to study the perceptions of adolescents with regard to obesity (body shape) and bullying. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 early adolescents. The data were assessed through content and interpretative phenomenological analysis. Thus the researchers tried to capture the essence of each individual interview. Several themes emerged from the data analysis, of which the most noteworthy were that youths in early adolescence perceive emotional, psychological, physical and verbal attacks as well as exclusion from peer group activities as forms of bullying. Participants perceived several consequences of bullying manifesting in their peers' behaviour. From the semi-structured interviews a general overview of perpetrators and victims of bullying was obtained. Lastly, a correlation between an early adolescent's body shape and victimisation was noted. The findings give insight into how obese young adolescents are perceived and treated by their peers. Furthermore, the findings elucidate what adolescents perceive as bullying and possible reasons for such behaviour. By identifying perceptions held by adolescents, future research can implement programmes to address these stereotypes, thus decreasing victimisation of obese adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1975 the global focus of nutritionists has shifted from the problem of malnutrition and the challenge of feeding increasing populations to a pandemic of obesity (Prentice 2005:93). Recently, obesity has received increased interest among international scholars. First world countries such as the United States of America (USA) (Amber waves 2005) and Australia (Soft drink ban for Vic schools ... 2006) have recognised obesity as a social issue of concern and for this reason undertook research and implemented government policies to curb obesity among children. Furthermore, obesity has been associated with bullying. Adolescents who are overweight or obese have a higher chance of becoming a victim to verbal and physical bullying (Janssen, Craig, Boyce & Pickett 2004:1187). Bullying among boys may result in the victim eventually becoming the perpetrator of physical bullying. As a result of their weight advantage they tend to be physically larger and stronger than their peers (Bullying and obesity... 2007), thus making physical bullying possible. Although extensive studies (Dixey, Sahota, Atwal & Turner 2001; Griffiths, Wolke, Page & Horwood 2006; Janssen *et al.* 2004) have been undertaken abroad concerning the link between bullying and childhood obesity, the

researchers found South African literature wanting in this regard. Against this background, the researchers aim to determine whether a child's body shape and weight has an impact on the occurrence of bullying behaviour. The researchers were granted permission by the Department of Education to study the perceptions of early adolescent primary school learners in the Brooklyn policing precinct, Pretoria, in order to establish the role weight and body shape play in bullying behaviour.

This research is exploratory in nature, as it aims to determine whether obesity during early adolescence has an impact on the likelihood that a child could fall victim to or become a perpetrator of bullying. The study had three main objectives:

- 1 Determine what early adolescents perceive as bullying behaviour;
- 2 Determine whether bullying during early adolescence has an effect on a child's behaviour; and
- 3 Gauge the possible effect that obesity during early adolescence may have on bullying behaviour.

The article has four sections, a literature review; an overview of the methodological procedures and techniques used in the study; the main

findings regarding the perceptions held by youths in early adolescence with regard to body shape and bullying; and the concluding thoughts regarding the current study as well as recommendations for further studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past obesity was mainly restricted to adults; however, recently there has been a global increase in obesity among children and adolescents. During the first global survey of body weight the World Health Organisation (WHO) found that 75.6 percent of American males of 15 years and older were overweight and 36.5 percent of those overweight males were obese. Similar results were found among the British male population, with 65.7 percent being overweight and 21.6 percent being obese (Field, Small & Bloom 2008:3). In this regard Du Toit and Van der Walt (2009:25) reported that during 2006, 53.8 percent of South African women and 31.2 percent of South African men were overweight. Monyeki, Pienaar, Mamabolo and Temane (2009:3) recorded similar findings in 2007, with 15.7 percent of the participating boys from their sample being classified as overweight and 5.5 percent as obese. In the female group 15.3 percent were overweight and 7.3 percent were classified as obese (Monyeki *et al.* 2009: 6). From these trends it is evident that females have a slightly higher rate of being overweight and obese than their male counterparts (Du Toit & Van der Walt 2009:24; Monyeki *et al.* 2009: 8). Furthermore, it was found that being female and overweight/obese had a significant impact on scholastic achievement, athletic competency and behavioural acceptance, whereas obesity among boys was associated with a negative effect on physical self-perception, for example physical appearance (Monyeki *et al.* 2009:12). Globally it is estimated that 17.6 million children under the age of five years are obese (Coetzee 2011:135). These are significant figures and should be treated as a serious warning, as many co-morbid problems usually accompany obesity, such as shyness, eating disorders (Mash & Wolfe 2005:384), physiological complications and early mortality (Taylor 2012:94).

Currently obesity is not classified as a mental disorder, even though it may have detrimental effects on a child's psychological and physical development (Mash & Wolfe 2005:383). Obese children are often ascribed negative labels, for example being referred to as 'dumb' and 'sloppy'. Such negative stereotyping may culminate in

discrimination. Stereotyping and discrimination may result in a decline in the social status of an adolescent which may result, as is often the case, in a poor self-image. Unlike other groups with impediments, obese people are regularly insulted and are seen as being lazy and often teased about their weight. Thus obese adults and children are held responsible for their weight problem (Taylor 2012:96). The discrimination and stereotyping that obese children have to endure are not limited to their peers, but have been found to include health professionals, teachers and even their parents (Ernsberger 2009:31; Puhl & Latner 2007:557, 562; Taylor 2012:96). As a result of the degrading manner in which they are treated, many obese people become distressed about their bodies. This distress may lead to dangerous food restriction practices, for example anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Mash & Wolfe 2005:377; Puhl & Latner 2007:566).

Types of bullying

Bullying has been associated with obesity among children (Janssen *et al.* 2004:1187). Obese children may become socially marginalised and this may increase their chances of becoming aggressive or depressed or of committing suicide (Coetzee 2011:135). For the purpose of this study bullying can be defined as the intentional physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and/or relational harm caused to a child or children by another child or children repeatedly and over an extended period of time and implies a real or perceived power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. As sexual and psychological bullying holds no relevance to the current study it will be omitted in the discussion that follows.

Physical bullying

Physical bullying includes hitting, biting, kicking, punching, pushing, stabbing, strangling, suffocating, hair pulling, burning and poisoning (Booyens, Beukman & Bezuidenhout 2008:38). Geyer (2007:81) found that 90 percent of her participants had been physically bullied, thus very few students had not experienced physical bullying. Bullies tend to victimise their victims physically multiple times (Geyer 2007:82). Boys are more often involved in physical bullying, be it as victim or perpetrator (Flint 2010:40; Wang, Iannotti & Nansel 2009:371).

Verbal bullying/abuse

Verbal bullying is the most common type of bullying experienced by children. This type of

bullying includes constant name-calling, teasing and the spreading of rumours (Booyens *et al.* 2008:38). The intent of verbal bullying is to communicate to another person that he or she is inherently bad or does not meet specific social standards. The participants from Geyer's (2007: 104) study reported being sworn at, threatened (via Short Messaging System (SMS), letters and phone calls), ascribed negative nicknames, intimidated, teased or being made fun of, being belittled during discussions, gossiped about, rumours spread about them and being sexually harassed. Verbal bullying is not only aimed at the victim but may include verbal attacks on the victim's family, racial and religious groups. This finding is not only applicable to South Africa, as international studies in the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and America have produced similar results with regard to racial bullying (Geyer 2007:96). Geyer (2007:96) found that 70 percent of the participants in her study had experienced verbal bullying of a racial nature. Many of these racial verbal remarks are based on inaccurate perceptions of a different racial group (Geyer 2007:95). Goldstein (2005) identifies four more types of verbal bullying, namely gossip, swearing, teasing or ostracism/shunning.

Relational bullying

Relational bullying is characterised by the exclusion of a peer from group activities. This type of bullying is more prevalent among girls as they perceive social standing and friendships as important (Flint 2010:40; Geyer 2007:97). As girls tend to belong to smaller, intimate groups, they have more opportunity for indirect aggression, for example gossiping and exclusion from the group. Although it is more prevalent among girls, many boys also experience relational bullying as significant in their lives. Relational bullying among boys should therefore be taken seriously, as it may be a risk factor in school shootings. In 13 out of 15 school shootings from 1995 to 2001 the shooters had previously experienced severe rejection, harassment and bullying by their peers in school (Dukes, Stein & Zane 2010:513). It must be noted that bullying is not the only risk factor in school shootings; however, it does tend to play a leading role (Preventing school shootings... 2002).

Emotional bullying

Emotional bullying includes any form of terrorising, humiliating, defaming and/or black-mailing of a peer (Booyens *et al.* 2008:38).

Risk factors that lead to bullying behaviour

Several risk factors have been identified that may increase the chances of a child participating in bullying behaviour. Bullies may present with several risk factors. School bullies tend to be bigger and physically stronger than their victims (Flint 2010:40). They tend to be self-involved and often come from families where there is lack of supervision (Booyens *et al.* 2008:39). It has been noted that bullies may be punished physically by their parents and are often victims at home (Flint 2010:40; Swearer & Doll 2001: 13). This may in turn cause the victim to become a reactive bully at school in order to vent his frustration.

Witnessing domestic violence has also been identified as a risk factor (Liang, Flisher & Lombard 2007:162). Perpetrators usually have no empathy for their victims and often refuse to take responsibility for their bullying actions. Some bullies may abuse alcohol and drugs and may display aggressive and impulsive behaviour (Flint 2010:40). Bullies may derive pleasure and receive psychological and/or material rewards from domineering others (Booyens *et al.* 2008: 39). This coincides with the tripartite model that proposes that a behaviour (bullying) may continue if it is seen as appropriate, doable and rewarding (by the perpetrator) (Gottheil & Dubow 2001:31). Being popular and having many friends increases the risk of becoming a bully and decreases the risk of becoming a victim (Wang *et al.* 2009:372). Being popular may increase a child's chances of becoming a perpetrator of bullying. This may be due to perceived pressure from the group to prove oneself and thus, through bullying others, the person is presented with an opportunity to attain social status within the group (Wang *et al.* 2009: 373).

Risk of bullying usually decreases with maturity. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey in America, bullying tends to decrease as age increases (DeVoe & Kaffenberger 2006:48). Social hierarchy can be used to explain this finding. As children enter middle school (grade 6), they may use bullying to achieve dominance within their social structure (Swearer & Cary 2003:65). Bullying may decrease as the dominance hierarchy within their social structure stabilises. As the power structure stabilises new younger children become easy prey, as they are smaller and weaker and become the new focus. Thus they become victims to older bullies

(DeVoe & Kaffenberger 2006:49). As the victims become older and stronger, the bully's attention will shift to younger and weaker children. In this regard Flint (2010:40) states that bullying may decrease during later adolescence because of fear of being punished more harshly if they are caught bullying. Furthermore, the perpetrators may have discovered less obvious forms of bullying or the victims may have learnt how to handle incidents of bullying and avoid being targeted.

The role of body shape in bullying behaviour

Apart from the physical ramifications of obesity children often experience social rejection (Janssen *et al.* 2004:1187). Being liked by their peers is of utmost importance during the social development of adolescents. Janssen *et al.* (2004:1189) found that obese and overweight children were more likely than their peers of average weight to be both the victims and perpetrators of verbal, relational and physical bullying.

It was noted that verbal bullying of obese children included weight-related name-calling and teasing, but did not include any references to ethnicity, colour or religion. However, when obese children were the perpetrators of verbal bullying they used race, colour and religion to make fun of their peers and abstained from referring to weight. This finding may be due to the obese bully trying to divert attention away from his own weight or body shape. The obese perpetrator may be seen as a victim-perpetrator, as he may verbally abuse others in order to retaliate for being teased about his weight (Janssen *et al.* 2004:1192).

Gender, weight and bullying

Griffiths *et al.* (2006:121) found that weight at age 7½ years predicted overt bullying for both boys and girls at approximately age 8½ years. Obese boys were 1.78 times more likely to be the perpetrators of overt bullying and 1.44 times more likely to be victims of relational bullying by the age of 8½ years. When compared to their peers of average weight, both obese girls (1.52 times) and boys (1.4 times) were more likely to be victims of overt bullying. Being obese tends to have greater disadvantages for girls than for boys. For girls it is not advantageous to be bigger and stronger than their peers, as most of their victimisation stems from verbal bullying. Furthermore, obese girls do not conform to the norm of what is perceived to be attractive in western culture. Obese girls also tend to date less and

have fewer romantic relationships than their obese male counterparts (Griffiths *et al.* 2006:123). Furthermore, the study found that underweight boys were not victims of overt bullying by the age of 7½ years. However, their female counterparts were found to be overt bullies by this age. This once more highlights the importance of one's physique in the western culture and the level of ascendancy that accompanies it (Griffiths *et al.* 2006:123).

Probable effects of bullying

The implications of bullying are aggravated by many teachers who choose to ignore this socially unacceptable behaviour. Many forms of bullying are actually illegal, for example hazing and sexual harassment. However, teachers choose not to acknowledge these acts as illegal and label them as 'just bullying'. This allows the bullying to continue and exempts the perpetrator from legal punishment (Stein 2001:2). Bullying has far-reaching implications for both the victim and the perpetrator. Many victims may refuse to attend school because of victimisation. Playing truant or skipping classes and extramural activities are avoidance techniques used by victims to escape from being bullied at school that may have a negative impact on academic achievement (DeVoe & Kaffenberger 2006:57; Flint 2010:40). Moreover bully victims may turn to physical violence in order to protect themselves. Victims of bullying are more likely than non-victims to carry weapons to school for self-protection (DeVoe & Kaffenberger 2006:58-59). Experiencing any form of violence in childhood may result in depression, physical abuse of one's own children, spouses and other adults, alienation and masochistic sexual behaviour (Flint 2010:40; Maree 2005:17). In a study by Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton and Scheidt (2001:2094) involving a sample of 15 686 children from public and private schools in America, victims of bullying had trouble making friends and had poor interpersonal relationships with their peers (Rivers, Duncan & Besag 2007:5). These children also reported being lonely. Isolation of victims may occur because other children avoid them, as being associated with a victim could affect their social standing negatively or they might fear that they might become a victim by association (Nansel *et al.* 2001:2098). Bullying can therefore have long-term effects on the individual. It has also been found that bullying not only affects the direct victims, but also the onlookers (Brown 2002:96-100).

Onlookers are those children who are neither victims nor perpetrators, but who have to witness the bullying behaviour. Just witnessing bullying can have adverse effects on a child's perception of school (Brown 2002:100). These children may feel fearful, incapable of acting, guilty about not helping their bullied peers and/or be tempted to join in the bullying. Over time, onlookers may become desensitised to the cruelty of bullying and they may perceive that bullying holds no negative consequences for the bully. This may encourage onlookers to act aggressively themselves. The word 'onlookers' refers not only to students, but may also include teachers who do not deal with bullying effectively. Furthermore, the perceived tolerance of onlookers encourages bullying behaviour, as bullies thrive on having an audience. Being an onlooker has great implications for society as a whole. Prolonged observation of bullying may affect the essential components on which healthy peer relations are built; these are empathy, compassion and perspective-taking (Anderson 2007:58-59).

A longitudinal study showed that boys who are the perpetrators of bullying at school are twice as likely as their non-offending peers to have a criminal record (for aggression and violence, usually related to alcohol consumption) and are four times more likely to be repeat offenders (Fleming & Towey 2002:9). Furthermore, a survey by Kidscape of youth offenders indicated that 92 percent of them had been bullies while still at school (Elliott 2002:255). Being labelled a bully can have devastating effects on a child (Rivers *et al.* 2007:131). This label may be carried for years; conditioning teachers to believe that the child is a problem child. This may lead to the child feeling rejected, ostracised and frustrated. Ultimately, it may cause the child to give up on school, become drop outs and fall into youth misbehaviour.

The implications of bullying may extend into adulthood. The Kidscape survey involved 1 044 adult participants to determine the long-term effects of bullying. The long-term effects included feelings of distrust, shyness, lack of courage, fear of new situations and segregation. Suicide, low self-esteem and trouble initiating friendships were also identified as long-term effects that bullying had on the participants (Elliott 2002:251-253). Eisenberg and colleagues found that adolescents who are teased because of their weight are two to three times more likely to contemplate suicide than their peers of average

weight (Puhl & Latner 2007:567). A recent study by Beatbullying estimated that bullying accounts for 44 percent of suicides among children of 10- to 14-years old ('Bullying' link to child... 2012). From the above-mentioned, it is clear that bullying affects the child not only in the here and now, but that its effects could ripple into adulthood. The consequences of bullying in childhood and adolescence may vary from mild to disabling.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this section the researchers give a brief description of the methodological process followed in the study.

Sample

No geographical borders could be identified for Pretoria East (South Africa) and for this reason the researchers opted to use the Brooklyn policing precinct as the demarcated geographical area for the study. In addition to the University of Pretoria, there are 36 other educational facilities, such as high schools, primary schools, crèches and schools for persons with special needs, in this geographical area, of which only 13 were selected. The selection was based on the criteria that the educational institutions had to provide education to adolescents aged 12 to 13 years. Thus all high schools, crèches and schools for children with special needs were excluded, as they did not meet the specific criteria. We approached the 13 primary schools after permission from the Department of Education to conduct research in these particular schools was granted. Only four primary schools of the 13 that we approached were willing to participate in the research study. Most of them indicated that they did not have a bullying problem and do not deem the study necessary in their particular school.

In view of the fact that the management councils and educators function *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent during school hours), the school's management councils were approached in order to obtain approval to conduct the study in the four primary schools that were willing to allow us to do the research. Pupils in early adolescence from the four schools were the primary participants in the qualitative study. The different grades and classes were selected via purposive sampling. The grade 6 and 7 pupils in each school were identified and class lists were obtained from each school's secretary. All the pupils' names were numbered and the first participant from each class list was selected using a random table of numbers. The individual

participants were selected via systematic sampling, which is regarded as probability sampling, thus each individual had the same chance of being selected to participate in the study (Strydom 2011:228). Every tenth name following the first randomly chosen participant was included in the study. The parents/legal guardians were informed of the envisaged study and were requested to sign a consent form giving the researchers permission to use their child as a research participant. Furthermore, the selected participants were requested to sign an assent form before the study commenced. The researchers

envisioned using a five percent sample, which should have resulted in approximately 107 interviews. However, obtaining consent was challenging due to the sensitive nature of the study and after sending out numerous cover and consent letters, we only received permission to interview 35 early adolescents from the four schools.

Unit of analysis

Table 1: Unit of analysis gives an outline of the demographics of the participating youths in early adolescence from the four primary schools.

Table 1: Unit of analysis

School	Grade		Gender		Home language		Total
	6	7	Male	Female	Afrikaans	English	
A	3	7	4	6	10	0	10
B	6	4	8	2	10	0	10
C	2	5	0	7	0	7	7
D	5	3	4	4	5	3	8
Total	16	19	16	19	25	10	35
	35		35		35		N=35

In Table 1 a summary of the unit of analysis is presented. The four different schools are indicated as A, B, C and D. The relevant grades, their gender as well as home language of the participants are indicated in the table.

Data collection

For the purpose of this study we made use of semi-structured interviews to gather information from 35 youths in early adolescence regarding obesity and bullying behaviour in the Brooklyn policing precinct. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for use with early adolescents as the method is flexible. It was deemed a suitable method to study the early adolescent's perceptions and personal feelings concerning obesity and bullying behaviour. In addition, it allowed the researchers to pursue interesting remarks and explore deeper where necessary, for example a statement made by an adolescent concerning the social standing of an obese friend. A list of predetermined questions in the form of an interview schedule was kept close at hand; however, we did not follow the interview schedule stringently but rather allowed the interview to flow naturally, as proposed by Greeff (2011:351-352). The researchers recorded questions and answers during the interview that arose from interesting comments that participants made (ESDS qualidata teaching... 2007).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis to avoid inter-personal interference and influence between participants

and to ensure confidentiality. The researchers informed the participants of the proceedings and the nature of the research. In doing so the researchers aimed to put the participant at ease and inform the participant about the relevant topics to be discussed. To elucidate and avoid ambiguous interpretations, we made use of probing questions when necessary in order to collect valuable data. To protect the interests of the participants, a social worker/psychologist was present for the duration of each interview.

Since the researchers planned to interview the participating early adolescents from the four primary schools in the Brooklyn policing precinct, we arranged for access to a classroom or office in each school where the interviews could be conducted in private and relative silence (Greeff 2011:350). The researchers sent letters to the parents of the participating adolescents to arrange a specific date on which the interviews would be conducted. The participants were reminded of the scheduled interview the day prior to the interview ensuring that the participants were present for the interviews. There are certain limitations when interviewing youths in early adolescence. The researchers had to keep in mind that concentration levels for long periods of time and the availability of participants after and during school hours could be obstacles. For this reason the researchers compiled the semi-structured interview schedule in such a manner that the interviews did not exceed 20 minutes.

DISCUSSION OF MAIN FINDINGS

The first part of the interview focussed on matters youths in early adolescence perceive as bullying.

Nature of bullying

Here the researchers aimed to explore what youths in early adolescence perceive as bullying behaviour, thus aiming to attend to research objective one. From the interviews we identified six themes with regard to what youths in early adolescence perceive as bullying behaviour, namely verbal, physical, emotional, relational and psychological bullying and level of continuity. It transpired that the participants in the current study identified verbal, physical, emotional, relational and psychological factors as the key components of bullying behaviour. Four [4/35] (11.4%) participants mentioned that bullying behaviour towards certain individuals takes place on a continuous basis. Although cyber and sexual bullying also occur, none of the participants in this study referred to sexual or cyber bullying. Furthermore, psychological bullying was omitted as a theme from the current study as the participants did not elaborate sufficiently on this type of bullying. The other types of bullying, namely verbal, physical, emotional and relational, will be discussed in the next section. The frequency or level of continuity will also be briefly examined.

Verbal bullying

De Wet (2005:711) as well as Mestry, Van der Merwe and Squelch (2006:50) identified verbal bullying as the most frequently experienced and witnessed form of bullying. A similar finding was made in the current study as 33 out of 35 (94.3%) of the participants identified verbal bullying more readily than other forms of bullying. The participants identified several variations of verbal bullying, such as verbally picking on others [frequent degrading remarks], insulting others, saying nasty things, speaking rudely about others, spreading rumours, swearing at others, name-calling and teasing. Several research participants [15/35] (42.9%) in this study identified teasing as the most frequently used method of verbal bullying at school.

Physical bullying

Physical bullying was mentioned by 21 out of 35 (60%) of the respondents. The varieties of physical bullying included physically hurting someone, hitting, being generally abusive, shoving, pushing a person up against a wall, forcing

individuals to do something that they really do not want to do and displaying negative body language. Negative body language (e.g. looking at someone in a threatening way or displaying body language that communicates a possible threat) can be regarded as physical bullying. Anderson (2007:42) and Maree (2005:16) both mentioned similar non-verbal gestures as a form of physical bullying. If an individual displays threatening body language which instils fear of immediate harm in other individuals, it can be considered as the first step towards an action. Thus, by displaying negative non-verbal body language that may instil fear in another person of being victimised, an individual may become liable to being charged with assault, according to South African Criminal Law.

Emotional bullying

Emotional bullying was only mentioned by ten [10/35] (28.6%) participants. However, these participants showed in-depth understanding of the concept and provided the researchers with a number of examples. Humiliation, emotionally hurting others, extortion, messing with someone, lowering someone's self-esteem and emotional blackmail were mentioned as forms of emotional bullying. Booyens *et al.* (2008:38) also regard humiliation and emotional blackmail as forms of emotional bullying. Maree (2005:16) refers to extortion as a form of bullying. Extortion encompasses the acquisition of goods by means of threatening an individual. In this regard a participant from the current study stated that her cousin had been a victim of extortion bullying; with some of her cousin's peers pushing her up against a wall and demanding money for the tuck-shop from her. From this, one can deduce that certain perpetrators of bullying have obtained a number of avenues to victimise their peers.

Relational bullying

Relational bullying was mentioned by 13 out of 35 (37.1%) participants and seemed to be a frequently recurring problem at two of the four participating schools. Some of the comments made by the participants in the current study with regard to relational bullying were the following:

A participant stated: Ek dink hoe groter, hoe groter jy is hoe meer sluit, hoe meer sluit ander kinders jou uit want hulle ek dink, hulle wil nie gesien word dat hulle saam met al die vet maatjies speel nie of iets nie... As jy te vet is dan dink ek dit is nogal 'n uitdaging om in te pas. (I think the bigger, the bigger you are the more you are excluded, the more other children exclude you, because I think they don't want to be

seen playing with fat friends or something ... If you're fat, I think it's quite a challenge to fit in.)

One participant admitted to being guilty of relational bullying in the past. "She was actually my best friend but I didn't want to take her to my party."

It is evident from these participants' statements that relational bullying takes place in these four schools and that established hierarchies within the pupils' social structures exist. In this regard Janssen *et al.* (2004:1187) found that obese adolescents run a higher risk of social rejection than their average weight peers. Flint (2010:40) adds that this type of bullying is more prevalent among girls, as they deem position in the social hierarchy as more important than boys do. We are of the opinion that relational bullying is used as a mechanism against other individuals to define their place within the social hierarchy at school and to define specific roles in the peer group. It can also be deduced that the peers with an overweight/obese body type are more prone to fall victim to relational bullying than children with an average body type. Adolescents with an average body type are perceived by society as complying with socially accepted standards of weight, beauty and attractiveness; thus they are able to secure a higher position within the social hierarchy.

Frequency of bullying

Although only a few participants [4/35] (11.4%) had an opinion on the frequency of bullying incidents, the researchers deemed these opinions important, as the frequency of bullying incidents is paramount in defining an action as a bullying incident. For example, a participant mentioned that bullying was committed continuously against the victim even after the victim had sought help from an outside source.

As mense jou soos sê, as hulle jou boelie deur om te sê jy's vet of dit lyk asof jy baie sleg is en jy lyk soos 'n vark en mense wat jou rondstamp en aanhou teister en nie ophou al ignoreer jy hulle nie. Um as jy hoof toe gaan en hulle hou net aan en goeters soos dit. (If for example people tell you ... if they bully you by saying that you're fat or you seem to be bad and you look like a pig and people shove you around and keep harassing you and don't stop even if you ignore them ... Um if you go to the principal and they just keep doing it and stuff like that.)

One participant regarded bullying as occurring on a daily basis. Two other respondents stated that they had solved their bullying problem by ignoring the perpetrator and because they did this the perpetrator did not get the reaction and outcome that he anticipated. In this regard a participant stated that:

Gewoonlik noem hulle name. Ja my broer het my name genoem en as die persoon reageer dan hou

hulle aan en as hulle nie reageer nie dan stop hulle en dis wat ek geleer het om glad nie te reageer nie en toe stop my broer. (Normally they call names. Yes, my brother called me names and when somebody reacts they carry on and if they get no reaction they stop; that is what I learnt, not to react at all and then my brother stopped.)

Ignoring the perpetrator and the forthcoming negative remarks is one of the methods for handling indirect bullying presented in Geyer's (2007:167) psycho-educational programme.

From the data obtained it is evident that the participants had an ample understanding of what behaviours constitute bullying. This may indicate that they may be either victims or perpetrators or that they have witnessed bullying at their school. Again, during this part of the interviews the participants did not mention cyber or sexual bullying. This may be due to the primary school participants' developmental stage, which, unlike that of high school pupils, is not yet marked by acute sexual awareness (Mestry *et al.* 2006:51). Another reason could be that the participants did not feel comfortable talking about sexual bullying because of the lack of a personal relationship with the researchers and the sensitive phase of sexual development the participants could be experiencing in early adolescence. Thus this finding should not be interpreted as meaning that sexual bullying does not occur in primary schools throughout South Africa. Further focussed research should be undertaken to determine the occurrence and frequency of sexual bullying in primary schools in South Africa.

The impact bullying during early adolescence has on a child's behaviour

From the data four categories were identified regarding the perceived effects bullying may have on an adolescent's behaviour, namely the reactive victim, internalisation, feeling distressed and long-term consequences.

The reactive victim

The reactive victim became a bully because of the fact that he was previously a victim of bullying. Becoming a bully in response to previous bullying was identified most frequently by four [4/35] (11.4%) of the participants in the current study. Espelage and Asidao (2001:55) reported similar results in their research study. A sub-category emerged from this category, namely bullying at home. Three out of the four participants perceived the school bully to be a victim of abuse and bullying at home, often identifying a sibling as the perpetrator. Similar findings were reported by Swearer and Cary

(2003:75), with the exception that victims of sibling bullying had an increased chance of becoming a bully at school if they had a greater number of siblings. They were of the opinion that the likelihood of becoming a reactive victim (bully) increases with the number of siblings at home who bully or abuse the victim. In addition, abuse or physical punishment by a parent/s increases the chance that a child could become a reactive victim. According to multiple authors (Corporal and humiliating... [sa]; Flint 2010:40) children who receive physical punishment from their parents are more likely to victimise their peers at school and engage in violent behaviour. Not being treated with respect and dignity by an individual's parents may lead to treating others in a similar fashion. Corporal/physical punishment of a child may instil negative values such as resolving conflict with violence, expressing frustration, anger and helplessness through violent behaviour and the idea that targeting smaller, weaker individuals is acceptable (Corporal and humiliating... [sa]). Thus when taking the literature into consideration, the participants were justified in their perceptions that many bullies are themselves victimised at home.

Internalisation

Only a few [4/35] (11.4%) participants mentioned internalisation as an effect of bullying. It is our opinion that it requires a certain degree of insight for children in early adolescence to be able to identify such an abstract construct. The researchers agree with the participants' perception of internalisation, as an individual learns through repetition and what others say may lead an individual to assume a particular position in the social hierarchy. How an individual is perceived by his/her peers is of significant importance for adolescents (Bullying keeps overweight... 2006). These relationships are paramount to social, emotional and psychological development. Adverse and humiliating bullying experienced by an individual may lead to the internalisation of negative self-evaluations (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie & Telch 2010:245). From the participants' statements it can be deduced that internalisation due to bullying has been witnessed in their peer group. They stated that negative remarks could be internalised by the victim, thus leading to the actualisation of the negative perceptions. Such negative self-evaluations may precipitate further victimisation. This finding can be explained by applying Merton's self-fulfilling prophesy. In an article entitled "The self-fulfilling prophecy",

Merton (1948:193) quotes Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". Thomas's quote illuminates the essence of the self-fulfilling prophesy in that public definitions may, be internalised, causing a paradigm shift with regard to the self which could steer future behaviour. Furthermore, Merton states that many individuals do not retain prejudices towards others; they honestly believe the validity of these public definitions. Public definitions refer to beliefs held by the prominent and most powerful social group. These beliefs are often not questioned and are perceived as fact. The vicious cycle of self-fulfilment can only be broken in that public definitions can be changed and the new definitions are accepted and internalised by society in its entirety (Merton 1948:196-197). From this it can be deduced that verbally bullying children because of their weight could lead them to believe what is said about them and then they will proceed to alter their behaviour as a manifestation of how others perceive them. These new, enforced beliefs may lead to withdrawal, low self-esteem, unhealthy dieting practices and even eating disorders. One participant from the current study gave a personal account of her experience with internalisation with regard to negative remarks about body shape. She stated that "at my old school in Joburg I used to be very um ... fat and I would think of myself as fat because everyone called me that". From the self-fulfilling prophesy it can be deduced that changing the public impression of obesity and weight in general may break the vicious cycle of the self-fulfilling prophesy.

Feeling distressed

A few respondents [6/35] (17.1%) reported feelings of sadness, crying, anger, becoming grumpy, nasty and rude in relation to bullying. In general they reported witnessing peers experiencing feelings of being distressed. They perceived the bullying as the reason why the feelings of distress manifested in their victimised peers. Some participants actually reported that their victimised peers avoided school and became truant to avoid victimisation. In this regard one participant stated that some bullied children would revert to truancy in order to avoid the bullies who plague them at school. Similar findings are also well documented in literature (Anderson 2007:57; Barreto 2011:2; Neser, Prinsloo, Ladikos & Ovens 2007:46, 48, 51; Ralekgokgo 2007:36; Roodt 2011:3; Vanderbilt & Augustyn 2010:317).

Long-term consequences

One participant reflected a very strong feeling about the effect bullying had on the victim's behaviour. He not only referred to immediate effects, but also incorporated long-term consequences in his response. He mentioned that a victim may never forget the incident, never trust other individuals and never be able to live the life that he wants to. This may be an indication that early adolescent victims are aware of the long-term consequences bullying could have on them. In this regard the participant stated:

As 'n iemand doen iets aan hom soos vyf jaar terug, hy slaan hom of doen iets lelik met hom sal daai persoon dit altyd onthou, en dan sal hy altyd bang wees vir persone en nooit uitstaan of hy sal nooit sy lewe lewe vat soos hoe hy wil nie. (If somebody did something to him, maybe five years previously, he hit him or did something nasty to him, that person will always remember it, and then he'll always be scared of people and never stand out or never live his life as he would like to do.)

Long term consequences of bullying behaviour during early adolescence could therefore affect a person's self-esteem and general functioning. According to DeVoe and Kaffenberger (2006: 57) as well as Flint (2010:40), bullying may lead to avoidance of school, which may lead to not pursuing higher education and thus fewer employ-

ment opportunities (Elliott 2002:243). From this it is evident that bullying restricts an individual's opportunity for self-actualisation. The Kidscape survey (Elliott 2002:251-253) revealed similar results; participants in the survey reported feelings of distrust, fear and trouble initiating friendships. Thus bullying not only has immediate consequences for the victim, but could have a rippling effect into adulthood.

General overview of perpetrators and victims of bullying

The following section reflects the responses the researchers received when the participants were asked what type of person usually becomes a perpetrator of bullying and what type of person becomes a victim of bullying. Several noteworthy themes were evident in the participants' description of both perpetrators and victims of bullying in the relevant peer group. These themes will be presented in Table 2 in order to explain what type of individual was perceived as a perpetrator or victim of bullying. It is significant that the same themes were evident in all four schools, namely, sport and academic achievement, economic status, physical appearance, social relationships and personality traits.

Table 2: General overview of perpetrators and victims of bullying

Themes	Victim	Number	Perpetrator	Number
Sport and academic achievement	- Do not participate in sport	4/35	- Rugby players	1/35
	- More intelligent than perpetrator	1/35	- Poor academic achievement	2/35
	- Academic achievement	1/35		
Economic status	- Materialistic status	3/35	- Rich	2/35
	- Lower economic status	3/35	- Not rich	1/35
	- Your environment	2/35		
	- Where you are from	1/35		
Physical appearance	- Overweight	22/35	- Overweight	7/35
	- Weaker	4/35	- Strong	3/35
	- Physical appearance	10/35		
	- Fashion sense	1/35		
Social relationships	- Thin	9/35		
	- Not part of the in-crowd	7/35	- Being part of the in-crowd	1/35
	- Unpopular	5/35	- Popular	7/35
	- Younger	1/35	- Older	1/35
	- Isolated	1/35	- Feeling that they do not belong	1/35
	- Something different about you	1/35	- Lonely	1/35
	- Different culture	1/35	- Scolded often	1/35
	- How you are raised	1/35	- Ridiculed	1/35
	- Do not stand up for yourself	1/35	- Problems at home	6/35
			- Lack of parental love	1/35
		- Abuse	1/35	
		- Nurturing	1/35	
		- Previous victim (reactive victim)	3/35	
Personality traits			- Jealousy	2/35
	- Jealousy	2/35	- Low self-esteem	5/35
	- Personality	2/35	- Feeling and experiencing sadness	1/35
	- How you react to certain situations	1/35	- Frustrated and needs to vent feelings	3/35
	- Quiet (withdrawn)	2/35	- Build-up of feelings	1/35
	- Manner of speaking (articulation)	1/35	- Hurting others to feel better	4/35
			- Thinks he is big	1/35
			- Thinks he is better	2/35
			- Thinks he is strong	1/35
			- Insecure	1/35
			- Watches 'ugly stuff' on TV.	1/35
		- No manners	1/35	
		- No self-respect	1/35	

From the findings it is evident that becoming a victim or perpetrator of bullying is not dependent on a single factor, but on a multitude of interrelated factors. The participants mentioned economic status, physical appearance, sport and academic achievement, social relationships and personality traits as reasons for becoming a perpetrator or victim of bullying. However, when considering victimisation, particular traits are more prevalent than others. Being overweight was mentioned by 22 out of the 35 participants (62.9%) as the most noteworthy factor contributing to their peer's victimisation at school.

The possible effect that obesity during early adolescence may have on bullying behaviour

Based on the data that were collected, particular conclusions were drawn. Of the 35 participants, 32 were willing to elucidate on this question; 19 participants (54.3%) were of the opinion that body shape influences the way an early adolescent is treated at school by his/her peers and eight participants [8/35] (22.9%) said that people's body shape sometimes influences how they are treated by others. Only five participants [5/35] (14.2%) said that body shape had no influence on how peers treated one another. From the data collected in this study, body shape is perceived as having a noteworthy influence on how adolescents are treated by their peers. Barreto (2011:5) is of the opinion that there is insufficient empirical proof that factors such as being overweight or wearing glasses increase a child's risk of being victimised. However, we found numerous studies confirming the impact obesity has on the prevalence of bullying victimisation in schools (Lumeng, Forrest, Appugliese, Kaciroti, Corwyn & Bradley 2010:e1304; Vanderbilt & Augustyn 2010:317). Lumeng *et al.* (2010:e1304-e1035) drew several conclusions from their research, which are relevant to the findings in the current study. Firstly, overweight children are more likely to be bullied than their counterparts of average weight, regardless of gender, race, academic achievement, family socio economic status (SES), social skills or school demographics. Secondly, obesity is a risk factor in itself. Thus obesity causes a child to be bullied and not the other way round. Lastly, bullying of obese children is rooted in negative perceptions regarding obesity.

In adding to the current body of knowledge we found that peers of average weight are not targeted because of their body shape, but other factors may still put them at risk of becoming

victims (e.g. poor social skills). Adolescents on the extremes of the weight continuum tended to be treated differently in relation to their peers of average weight. Adolescents with larger figures were more readily perceived to be victimised at school because of their body shape. These adolescents were more frequently perceived to be the victims of verbal and relational bullying. Verbal bullying included being teased, being called names, being gossiped about and having derogatory remarks made about them. Relational bullying may include being rejected, not seen as romantically attractive and being excluded from groups and games during school intervals. In a recent study, Zeller, Reiter-Purtill and Ramey (2008:760) found that children perceive their overweight peers as less attractive and less athletically competent. These findings correlate with our findings, as some [9/35] (25.7%) of the participants stated that overweight adolescents were excluded from physical games or that when they were allowed to participate, their peers allocated them unfavourable positions in the team (e.g. goalkeeper or reserve during a soccer match).

Two participants from the current study mentioned that if adolescents are not popular at school, their weight (thin or overweight) will be used as a tool or point of departure to bully them. Parents, educators and health care professionals alike should remain vigilant, as obesity is a recognised factor contributing to bullying victimisation. It should be kept in mind that any physical attribute (e.g. eczema, cleft lip, acne) which deviates from the accepted social norm could be identified by the perpetrator and used to his advantage (Vanderbilt & Augustyn 2010:317). A theoretical model can be used to elucidate these findings. The model proposes that a relationship exists between physical appearance and social functioning. Individuals react to physical appearance in relation to the importance society places on physical attractiveness and beauty. Children are very reliant on physical cues in order to interpret the meaning behind social interactions and situations. This may cause children to be easily influenced by collectively created social stereotypes. Children may unknowingly internalise these stereotypes and this may lead to the victimisation of overweight children during social interactions. Bullying may lead to the victim acting out such stereotypical behaviour (e.g. obese children are unfriendly). This behaviour may reinforce the stereotype and consequently lead to further bullying of the

obese peer (Janssen *et al.* 2004:1192). Therefore parents and educators should be attentive to any changes in an adolescent's behaviour, as this may indicate that the adolescent has become a victim of bullying.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants from the current study regarded bullying behaviour as verbal, emotional, physical, social and psychological harm caused to a child on a continuous basis by a peer at school. This finding is very much in line with the objective aimed for. When taking the perceived characteristics of victims and perpetrators into consideration, the power/dominance element becomes clear, with stronger peers bullying weaker peers. From the data it is evident that the participants had sufficient understanding of behaviour which could constitute bullying. The researchers found a discrepancy with regard to the omission of sexual bullying by the participants. Other research studies (Mestry *et al.* 2006:51; De Wet 2005:715) have shown that sexual bullying does take place in certain South African schools. We are of the opinion that research regarding sexual bullying in primary schools is needed in order to determine the extent and prevalence of this type of bullying among pre- and early adolescents in South Africa.

Bullying affects each individual differently; some individuals may avoid school and play truant regularly whereas other individuals may resort to aggressive behaviour in order to feel powerful. The abstract phenomenon of internalisation was identified as a consequence of bullying, whereby victims adopt certain labels ascribed to them by perpetrators and then act accordingly. From the literature review section it was evident that continuous bullying may lead to truancy, poor grades, withdrawal, lack of intimate friendships, distrust, shyness, lack of courage and possible suicide (DeVoe & Kaffenberger 2006:57; Elliott 2002:251-253; Flint 2010:40; Nansel *et al.* 2001:2098). Owing to the continuous nature of bullying, its devastating effects may be evident in adulthood with destructive consequences, such as lack of higher education, being fit to be employed only in unskilled work, low self-esteem, trouble initiating friendships and depression. If there is any truth in the findings of DeVoe and Kaffenberger (2006:57), Elliott (2002:251-253), Flint (2010:40) and Nansel *et al.* (2001:2098) the

consequences of bullying can be severe enough to be perceived as life-altering. For this reason, adolescents, parents and educators alike should be educated to understand that bullying is not acceptable behaviour and should not be minimized as a mere phase or as a part of the growing-up process. Without intervention such behaviour is likely to continue and exacerbate, with some victims becoming perpetrators of bullying themselves.

From the findings it is evident that becoming a victim or perpetrator of bullying is not dependent on a single factor, but on a multitude of interrelated factors. The participants mentioned economic status, physical appearance, sport and academic achievement, social relationships and personality traits as reasons for becoming a perpetrator or victim of bullying. However, when considering victimisation, particular traits are more prevalent than others. Obesity was one of the leading causes cited by the participants for being seen as unpopular by peers and could contribute to victimisation. Thus it can be deduced that physical appearance plays a pivotal role in the establishment of a social hierarchy in early adolescence. In the current study overweight adolescents were often reported as being socially rejected and verbally abused by their peers. Overweight adolescents were often perceived to be socially excluded owing to peers not wanting to be associated with fat children. This finding may be explained by the degree of importance adolescents attribute to maintaining a low level of body fat that western society deems attractive. Research by Griffiths *et al.* (2006:123) has shown that obese and overweight female adolescents have fewer romantic relationships. In this regard a male participant from the current study stated that girls tend to find boys with six packs, who achieve in sport and who are popular and attractive. He adds that girls will not go for a body if he is too fat. For this reason we recommend that further research be conducted to ascertain why obese adolescents are not seen as attractive to their opposite sex peers.

Furthermore, overweight adolescents were more likely to be stereotyped as dirty, mean and lazy by their peers (Taylor 2012:96). However, in the current study overweight adolescents were perceived to have more positive personality traits than their thin counterparts. Only four participants described overweight peers as nasty, rude and mean. It should be noted that these participants felt that their overweight peers behaved in such a manner in response to being

victimised at school. A noteworthy number of the participants in the current study held their overweight peers accountable for their weight problem, stating that they ate too much, consumed unhealthy food regularly and exercised insufficiently. Taylor (2012:96) is of the opinion that owing to negative stereotyping, overweight individuals are held accountable for their weight and are discriminated against accordingly. Furthermore, such discrimination may accumulate into a decline in social status. This finding coincides with the current study and may offer insight into the social rejection of overweight adolescents. In view of the research results, the researchers recommend further research into the relationship between stereotypes, obesity and the prevalence of bullying at school. If the origin of obese stereotyping can be identified, steps can be taken to reduce such negative perceptions and thus decrease the occurrence of the victimisation of obese and overweight adolescents. Furthermore, additional research is needed to determine

why obesity in adolescence may lead to bullying and elicit bullying behaviour in certain instances.

A matter for concern that was revealed by the current study was that the adolescents from the four schools involved placed so much emphasis on body shape that their living world and everyday functioning seemed to some extent dependent on it. Furthermore, most bullying incidents occur during school hours. This is problematic, as adolescents spend an average of six hours a day at school (excluding extramural activities), which makes the school one of their primary care givers but also a first-rate territory for prolonged bullying. Better anti-bullying programmes have to be implemented in schools in order to decrease the occurrence of this potentially devastating behaviour. Despite the small research sample, the study has contributed to the current body of knowledge, as it has given a glimpse into early adolescents' perceptions regarding body shape and the role it plays in the bullying of early adolescents.

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