When the bullied peer is native versus immigrant: A mixed-method study with a sample of native and immigrant adolescents

Abstract

An increasing number of immigrant students attend Italian schools, with the possibility of being involved in bullying episodes. A few studies have investigated this phenomenon, providing some evidence that immigrant students may face an increased risk to being bullied compared to native students. The present study adopted a mixed-method design, which may better catch the dynamics of bullying towards immigrant peers. Six-hundred and twenty-nine native and immigrant students (20.5 % with immigrant background; 54.8% girls) filled in self-report measures about their bullying experiences, popularity, acceptance of diversity at school and prejudice. Thirty-five pupils (54% with immigrant background) were also interviewed. Two hypothetical bullying scenarios were presented, one depicting a native victim and one depicting an immigrant victim. After each scenario, adolescents were encouraged to reason about the motives for bullying. Quantitative data showed that general bullying was associated with perceived popularity status among peers, while racial bullying was associated with prejudice but not peer status. The relevance of anti-immigrant prejudices in driving bullying emerged also from adolescents' interview. The qualitative data indicated that among the reasons for bullying, adolescents mentioned a desire for dominance and popularity, in particular when the victim was non-immigrant. Findings suggest that, in addition to individual and peer group-related risk factors, prejudice also needs to be addressed in anti-bullying interventions aimed to counteract racial bullying.

Keywords: school-bullying; racial bullying; prejudice; peer status; mixed-method

Introduction

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Bullying is an intentional, deliberate and repetitive behavior initiated by aggressive children and adolescents towards their weaker peers (Smith, 2016). Although much of the bullying literature did not take into account students' ethnic background, in relatively recent years, several studies specifically investigated bullying towards students belonging to ethnic minority groups and having an immigrant background (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Larochette, Murphy & Craig, 2010; Strohmeir, Kärnä, & Salmivalli, 2011).

General bullying and bullying towards immigrants have different features and therefore, they need to be investigated as distinct phenomena. However, the two phenomena are not only conceptually distinct. Indeed, distinct variables have been suggested to affect them. General bullying takes place between students belonging to the same ethnic group and might be triggered by a need to obtain a high status in the peer group (Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Previous studies have shown that students who manifest bullying behavior are popular among their peers, while victims have most often a low status, are isolated and rejected and have poor friends (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005). Bullying towards immigrants is aimed at harming a peer belonging to ethnic minority groups and it is often associated with prejudice (Dessel, 2010). findings suggested that immigrant youth are not only at risk of racial discrimination and bullying, but they are also more likely to be the target of relational and sexual bullying (Strohmeier, et al., 2011).

While an association has been documented between general bullying (i.e., not triggered by ethnicity or culture) and high status, the association between bullying towards immigrant youths and social status is less investigated. If on one hand, it is reasonable to speculate that students belonging to minority groups may be victims of prejudice-based forms of harassment (Bucchianeri, Gower, McMorris & Eisenberg, 2016), on the other hand, it is also possible that these youths are an easy target from the point of view of those who wish to obtain or maintain a high status in the peer group. Hence, two alternative hypotheses were tested: 1) Bullying towards immigrants is mainly explained by

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individual prejudices towards ethnic minority groups; 2) Bullying targeting immigrants is mainly explained by the individual's position within the peer group. The two hypotheses were explored through a mixed-method design. As to quantitative data, we also examined the association between the two forms of bullying and furtherinfluential variables, such as the individual perception that cultural diversity is accepted at school and openness towards cultural diversity... As to qualitative data, the two hypotheses were explored through the examination of narratives of both native and immigrant students who were interviewed about motives to bully a native and an immigrant newcomer in the classroom.

Bullying and Social Status

Research on bullying suggested that bullying is associated with prestige and dominance goals, along with high popularity status (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Caravita, Di Blasio &Salmivalli, 2009; de Bruyn, Wissink & Cillessen, 2010; Sijtsema, et al., 2009). However, in spite of being perceived as popular, bullies are often disliked by their peers (de Bruyn et al., 2010). In this respect, a distinction between popularity and acceptance should be outlined. While popularity refers to an individual's ability to be interpersonally effective and achieve social goals either for oneself or for the group, acceptance refers to the degree with which a child is liked by his/her classmates and is positively associated with prosocial and cooperative behavior (Cillessen, 2009). Aggressive and manipulative behaviors may give a chance to obtain leadership and popularity within the peer group, and there is some evidence that perceived popularity can act as an additional motive to bully (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012). Indeed, students who bully their peers are prone to achieve their social goals through strong self-assertion and coercion, rather than through cooperative behavior (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). Likely, due to their low levels of cooperativeness and sensitiveness, adolescents who bully their peers are poorly liked and accepted by their peers (de Bruyn et al., 2010).

Although previous studies consistently documented that general bullying is associated with high popularity and low acceptance, to our knowledge only very few studies replicated these findings with

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samples of native and immigrant youth (e.g., Caravita, Donghi, Banfi, & Meneghini, 2016). According to Allport's formative contact theory (1954), equal status among groups positively affects intergroup contact. However, children belonging respectively to the ethnic majority and minority groups might not have an equal social status. This might be especially true when the immigrant peer is a newcomer. Hence, children belonging to minority groups might be exposed to episodes of bullying due to their marginal role in the peer group (i.e., low peer acceptance and low popularity).

Literature indicated that especially in schools with increasing racial and socioeconomic heterogeneity, there might be a disparity between native and immigrant students' social status and that minority youth tend to experience a lower social status compared to majority students (Destin, Richman, Varner, & Mandara, 2012). The ethnic composition of the school also affects bullying; indeed, immigrant children are more likely to be victimized in schools where ethnic minority groups are under-represented (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). However, previous studies investigating the classroom ethnic composition have produced mixed findings. While some studies have found that the number of victims was not related to the ethnic composition of the classroom (Fandrem, Strohmeier & Jonsdottir, 2012), some other studies, reported higher rates of victimization in classrooms with a high proportion of ethnic minority students (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). It has been suggested that within diverse settings, students belong to one of many ethnic groups that share a balance of power (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2006); therefore, immigrant students are less likely to be victimized.

Despite these findings in the literature, previous studies have not investigated to what extent social status along with further individual and contextual variables may be associated with bullying towards native and immigrant students.

Bullying towards Native and Immigrant Students: The Role of Prejudice, Perceived cultural acceptance at school and Cultural Openness

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The school climate, defined as the quality of social interactions as shaped by the school norms, values, rules and organizational structures was suggested to affect bullying episodes (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009). Students who perceive their schools as unfair and non-supportive may be likely to participate in bullying (Gendron, Williams & Guerra, 2010). On the opposite, in schools with less violence, students have a positive relationship with their teachers and tend to perceive the school climate as fair (Johnson, 2009). A positive school climate promotes students' engagement and reduces experiences of victimization among students of different ethnicities (Konold, Cornell, Shukla & Huang, 2017; Walsh et al., 2016). Indeed, recent findings suggested that when both immigrant and native students feel supported by their peers, they experience low levels of victimization, irrespective of the school immigrant composition (Walsh et al., 2016).

Along with school climate, also the shared prejudices and stereotypes towards minority youth may affect episodes of harassment and bullying (Bucchianeri, Gower, McMorris & Eisenberg, 2012). The Social Identity Development Theory (Nesdale, 2004) states that children gradually develop a sense of a national group membership along with in-group favoritism. When children and adolescents internalize a social group membership as part of their self-concept, they are motivated to view that social group in a positive way, while negative prejudices towards the outgroup could be developed. Prejudice has been conceptualized as one of the factors, that contributes to the problem of bullying (Dessel, 2010). Coherently with the above-mentioned theory, the Social Dominance Theory (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006), postulates that prejudice and beliefs serve to legitimize discrimination of low status groups (e.g., ethnic minority groups) with the aim of maintaining and enhancing group-based hierarchy. Individuals who manifest a high social dominance orientation are more likely to discriminate immigrants partly because of their anti-immigrant prejudice and partly because of their poor openness towards cultural diversity (Küpper, Wolw, & Zick, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising that recent studies showed that high levels of students' anti-immigrant attitudes increase the likelihood of racial bullying (Özdemir,

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Sun, Korol, Özdemir, & Stattin, 2018). However, a variable that may hamper episodes of bullying towards immigrant peers is students' individual tendency to be open to cultural diversity. Indeed, students who are open to different cultures may be more willing to socialize with their immigrant peers. In particular, school is an important socializing agent that might influence children's beliefs and behaviors. Hence, along with openness to cultural diversity, the individual perception of the extent to which the school is willing to accept other cultures could also affect the bullying of immigrant peers. However, the role of prejudice, openness to cultural diversity and the individual perception of acceptance of different cultures at school, in affecting racial bullying still needs to be investigated in comparison to the possible influence of individual's peer status as a possible motive of bullying. The present research attempts to understand whether general and racial bullying are both associated with social status or whether racial bullying might be considered as a distinct form of bullying, which is mainly associated with prejudice and poor openness towards cultural diversity.

Immigrant students in Italian schools

In recent years, a large number of children aged under 15 moved to Italy through family migration, while the number of unaccompanied minors and separated children reaching the Italian shores is continuously increasing (+14% in 2016 compared to the previous year; OECD, 2017). According to official statistics, in 2017, immigrants constituted 8.3% of the whole population in Italy (ISTAT, 2017).

As a result of the increasing immigrant flux towards Italy, the immigrant student population has been growing and becoming increasingly diverse in the past decade (Azzolini, 2011). In the school year 2015-2016 immigrant students who are resident in Italy were 9.2% of the whole school population. Lombardy - where the present study was conducted – is the Italian region with the highest number of immigrant students (204.000 students; ISMU, 2017).

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In spite of some policy papers issued in recent years by the Education Ministry, aimed at promoting integration of foreign students (C.M., Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2014), an institutionalized body of policies oriented at integrating immigrant students is missing in Italy. Instead, as noted by Contini (2013) intervention programs aimed at reducing achievement gaps between immigrant and native students, as well as programs of language support addressed to first generation immigrants and involvement of parents in schools are fragmentary, if not completely missing. This picture, might affect the integration of immigrant students, as well as the educational gap between native and immigrant students (Azzolini, 2011, Contini, 2013). Beyond the school achievement gaps, it seems also urgent to focus on the peer relationships between native and immigrant students. According to the Integrative Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; 2000), the increase of influx of immigrants in communities and school may pose a fundamental psychological (e.g., dominance) and symbolic threat (e.g., moral, values, standards) and may facilitate the development of prejudices towards immigrants and inter-group conflict (Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan & Martin, 2005; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Hence, immigrant students may challenge the position of the majority group and attaining social dominance. This process may encourage competition for social status, while creating a context for conflict and bullying. Hence, investigating whether foreign students might be at risk of bullying due to their immigrant background becomes a priority.

The present study

To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies explored racial bullying in Italian schools (e.g., Caravita et al., 2016; Mazzone, Thornberg, Stefanelli, Cadei & Caravita, 2018) and only one study explored this phenomenon with a mixed-method design, though the quantitative findings were based only on frequency analysis (Cavicchiolo, Alivernini, & Manganelli, 2015). Furthermore, research in this field has mainly focused on ethnic harassment and victimization by adopting a victim's perspective. However, little attention has been paid to understand this phenomenon from the

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perpetrator's perspective (Özdemir et al., 2018). Based on the assumption that bullying towards same-country and immigrant peers are distinct phenomena, in this study, we aim at investigating the role of different variables in explaining them. More specifically, given the poor evidence about the risk factors for bullying students with an immigrant background, in this study, we aim at investigating whether racial bullying is associated with prejudice when the effects of social status are controlled for. We hypothesized that, differently from the general bullying, racial bullying is explained more by prejudice than by social status among peers. Further, we investigated the associations between racial bullying, openness to diversity and the individual perception that cultural diversity is accepted at school. In order to offer a broader picture of the phenomenon object of investigation and due to its complexity, a mixed-method approach has been used. Previous studies mainly adopted a quantitative approach to investigate bullying. However, the potential limitation of quantitative methods is that they are not able to capture children's explanations for bullying. Given the complexity of bullying towards same-country and immigrant children, it is proposed that a mixed-method research design, including both quantitative and qualitative measures would be able to better detect the phenomena under investigation. Therefore, in this study, we aim at complementing quantitative data collected through self-report questionnaires and qualitative data collected through a semi-structured interview. This type of integrative approach provides for validation of patterns derived from self-report measures and at the same time allows to identify previous unstudied or emergent patterns related to students' experiences (Guerra, Williams & Sadek, 2011).

Specifically, in the present study, we aimed to: 1) Investigate the role of popularity and acceptance, in shaping general and racial bullying; 2) Investigate prejudice as a possible risk factor of bullying towards immigrant peers, while controlling for other possible influential factors, such as popularity and acceptance; 3) By using a qualitative approach, we also investigated adolescents' perspectives about the reasons for bullying their peers. More specifically, we explored the reasons for

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bullying immigrant and same-country peers and the role of prejudice in shaping students' ideas about the motives for bullying immigrant peers.

Method

Sample

Participants were 692 students (M_{age}= 13.1; SD= 1.4; 54.6% girls) attending two middle and two high schools located in the areas of Milano and Varese, in the Region of Lombardy in Northern Italy. Ninety-eight students (14.2% of the whole sample) had an immigrant background (35.5% from Europe; 28% from Africa; 17.2% from Asia; 10.8% from South America; 8.6% from Central America), with both parents born in countries other than Italy. Among the immigrant students, 45.9% were immigrant of first generation and 54.1% were of second generation. All the immigrant participants spoke Italian fluently. A subsample of 35 immigrant students (17 boys,18 girls) were selected randomly from the larger sample to participate in individual interviews. Sixteen students attended middle school, while the remaining 19 students attended high school. Specifically, the subsample consisted of 18 Italian students and 17 immigrant students (4 were from Europe, 4 were from Asia, 5 were from Africa and 4 were from South America).

Measures

Florence Bullying and Victimization Scale (Palladino, 2014). This self-report questionnaire includes 16 items for victimization (α=0.72) and 15 items for bullying (α=0.80). The scale includes 1-item respectively for racial bullying (e.g., I insulted others because of their skin color or culture) and racial victimization (e.g., I was insulted because of my skin color or culture). Students were also asked to indicate whether they acted the behaviors reported in the questionnaire either towards their Italian peers, Non-Italian peers or Both Italian and non-Italian peers (e.g., Usually you behave these behaviors towards: Italian peers, Non-Italian peers; Both Italian and non-Italian peers). Participants expressed how often they were involved in each behavior on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=never, to 5=several

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times a week). At the end of scale one item was added asking whether the bullying behavior was acted towards Italian peers, non-Italian peers or peers belonging to both the groups.

Acceptance of cultural diversity at school (Georgia Department of Education, La Salle, & Meyers, 2014). Perception that cultural diversity is accepted at school was assessed by administering the 4-item subscale of the self-report The Georgia School Climate Survey (e.g., Students of this school are treated fairly by other students regardless of race, ethnicity or culture; $\alpha=0.75$). Participants expressed the degree of agreement with each item on a 4-point Likert scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree, to 4= Strongly Agree).

Prejudice towards immigrants (Caravita & Miragoli, 2007; Buccoliero & Maggi, 2006). This self-report instrument includes 14 items assessing explicit prejudice towards immigrants (e.g., Immigrants steal Italian people's job; $\alpha=0.50$). Participants expressed the degree of agreement with each item on a 4-point Likert scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree, to 4= Strongly Agree).

Openness towards peers of other cultures (Caravita & Miragoli, 2007; Buccoliero & Maggi, 2006). This self-report instrument assesses openness towards people belonging to other cultures (e.g., Do you like meeting up peers belonging to other cultures? $\alpha=0.64$) on a 4-point Likert scale (from 1=not at all, to 4=a lot).

Social status (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Two dimensions of peer group status were assessed; i.e., acceptance and popularity. Students were asked to nominate up to five classmates that they liked the most and liked the least, along with the most popular and least popular classmates.

Data Collection and Procedure

Principals and school teachers of the four schools expressed their consent for the research and parents gave their written consent for the participation of their children in the study. Thirty point three percent of the students of the classrooms involved in the study were not consented to participate by their parents. The Ethical committee of the Department of Psychology of the University XX

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(information withheld for peer review) approved the research project. The study was conducted according to the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA). The self-report measures were administered in group-sessions at the school places, with students sitting at single desks. Each group-session lasted around one hour. A trained administer supervised the session, responding participants' clarification questions. Before participants answering the measure assessing bullying, the administer read aloud a definition of bullying which was discussed with the participants in order to clarify the specificity of bullying in comparison to other forms of aggression. Participants were assured confidentiality and were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence.

The interviews were individual and took place at the school places. Two trained Psychology students conducted the interviews in a quiet room of the school. Participants were treated as competent commentators. The interviewers were instructed and trained to actively listen and communicating a genuine interest (e.g., nodding their head, being responsive and empathic, saying things like "I see"; "okay") and taking a non-judgmental approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Two brief vignettes depicting a new classmate being bullied were presented to each participant. One of the vignette depicted a new classmate coming from another Italian city, while the other vignette depicted a new classmate coming from another country. The two vignettes were presented randomly and included relational, verbal and physical prevarications. The vignettes were formulated from a second-person perspective and matched each participant's gender. An example of scenario is as follows: *You are back to school since a few weeks after summer vacation. Beyond your old classmates, there is also a new classmate **coming from another country/another Italian city**. She has not friends yet and she is alone all the time. During recess, some of your classmates started to call her names; they hide her backpack and other belongings, so that she cannot find them anymore. They also started to beat her up in the corridor. At the end of the school day, they refuse to make their way back home with*

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her and do not talk to her. In the afternoon, your classmates meet each other at the park to spend their time together; however, they never ask the new classmate to join them. The new classmate is not able to defend herself in all of these situations.

After each scenario, the interviewers stated: "*I wonder why things like these happen to kids of your age",* and asked each participant the following question: *"What do you think about things happening in this situation?"* Appropriate follow-up questions were asked during the interviews (e.g., *Can you tell me more about your point of view about that? In your opinion, why children like those in the story are excluded and beaten up?*). The interviewer stressed that there were no wrong or correct answers; therefore, participants were invited to freely express their point of view. The interviews lasted approximately each 30 minutes and were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim and coded. Before realizing each interview, students were asked if they were willing to being interviewed; however, none of the randomly selected students refused to take part in the study. Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality of all information provided. The interviews were examined and interpreted using a phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 1997).

Data analysis

Quantitative data. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) for bullying was .16, whereas ICC for the racial bullying was .002. Even if the intraclass correlation index of the racial bullying was low, multilevel regression models were run (Mplus software; Muthèn & Muthèn, 1998–2017) with both bullying and racial bullying as criterion variables at the within and between levels, in order to control for the effects of the percentage of immigrants within the classroom, by introducing this variable as predictor at the between (classroom) level. Predictors at the within level were: age, gender (0 = boys, 1 = girls), immigrant status (0 = non-immigrant, 1 = immigrant), prejudice towards immigrants, perception of cultural acceptance at school, cultural openness, perceived popularity, acceptance of cultural diversity at school.

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Qualitative data. The verbatim transcription of all the interviews was read and coded by two independent judges, who codified the content in micro-categories. Sixty-eight categories emerged and are reported in Table 3. Examples of the verbatim of some of the categories are the following: To boast of themselves "[they behave this way] to appear superior ….they want to be noticed for …being the center of attention"; Peer support "Because most of the times the bullies want to be the ones who can do it ... they do it for the others ... Yes, because in the end I don't target a person if I'm alone. Because if I were only one then the person would defend himself because we would be one against one, we would be even. While if there is a large group you wouldn't be able to defend yourself"; Problems of the bully's family "maybe in their daily life they don't have what they wish ... they have family problems like the drugged father ... they don't have good school achievements"; Skin color "Because they are different ….because of the skin color"; "because he's a newcomer… and is not well integrated in the classroom, and since he comes from another country he is teased..."; Different habits "I'm from Albania, nobody tells me anything, but if I wear the veil as the Arabian girls the people may start to ignore me".

The agreement index (Cohen's Kappa) between the two coders was 0.91. From the examination of the micro-categories the profile of the bully and the profile of the victim emerged as two macro-categories, according to which the adolescents explain bullying in the two situations (i.e., when the victim is immigrant vs. when the victim is non-immigrant).

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Results

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Descriptive Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the variables are reported in Table 1. Both general and racial bullying were more typical of boys than girls. Immigrants were more likely to be victimized, and racially victimized, but the immigrant status was not associated with bullying. Non-immigrants showed higher levels of prejudices towards immigrants, whereas immigrants were more

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open to peers from other cultures. Racial bullying was positively associated with prejudices towards immigrants and perceived popularity, and negatively with openness to the contact with others and perceiving that cultural diversity is accepted at school. General bullying was associated positively with prejudices towards immigrants and perceived popularity, and negatively with the perception that cultural diversity is accepted at school. Interestingly, perceiving that cultural diversity is accepted at school correlated at a larger extent with general bullying (-.29) than racial bullying (-.12). When examining the type of victims (Italians vs. non-Italians vs. Italians and non-Italians) of the one's own bullying, among non-immigrant participants 80.4% of students stated to bully Italians, 7.2% non-Italians, and 12.3% both Italians and non-Italians. Among immigrant participants, 51.7% stated to bully only Italian victims, 10.3% to bully non-Italians, and 37.9% to bully both Italians and non-Italians ($\chi^2(2) = 25.82$, $p < .001$). Two one-way ANOVAs with Bronferroni post-hoc procedures revealed that students who bullied only non-Italians showed significant higher level of prejudice ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.45$) and lower levels of cultural openness ($M = 2.80$ $SD = 0.60$) than adolescents who bullied both Italian and non-Italian school-mates (prejudice: $M = 2.16$, $SD = 0.43$; cultural openness: $M = 3.16$ $SD = 0.56$): prejudice, $F(2, 384) = 3.07$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.52$; cultural openness, $F(2, 383) = 4.17$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$.

Bullying, Prejudices and Status among Peers: Quantitative Data

In the multilevel regression models in which the percentage of immigrants in classroom was controlled for (Table 2), general and racial bullying was more typical of boys than girls. General bullying was significantly associated with perceived popularity (positively) and perceiving that cultural diversity is accepted at school (negatively). Racial bullying was significantly associated with prejudices towards immigrants (positively), but not with individual's social status among peers as perceived popular or socially preferred. Furthermore, greater racial bullying was associated with less perception that cultural diversity is accepted at school, even if this association was marginally significant ($p = .06$).

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Bullying, Prejudices and Status among Peers: Qualitative Data

The qualitative analysis of the content material of the interviews resulted in 68 micro-categories (Table 3) regarding the reasons for bullying when the victim is non-immigrant or immigrant in the adolescents' perspective. Then, the phenomenological interpretation of the micro-categories leaded to identify two main interpretative dimensions related to the individual characteristics of the bully and the individual characteristics of the victims (see Table 3).

When the victim was non-immigrant, 28.3% of the explanations provided by the non-immigrant participants regarded the position and the relational status of the victim among peers (21.6%: Victim's weakness, Isolation/loneliness, Is helpless, Low popular, and Low popular in the social networks), the bully's behavior in front of peers (To boast of themselves), and the support given to the bully by the peer-group (Peer support, group bullying). Similarly, the immigrant participants explained bullying a non-immigrant victim with bully's relational motivations or characteristics in the 17.4% of the cases (To boast of themselves, Wish of power, Peer pressure/obligation, To not be isolated, Fear of being victimized), and with victim's relational characteristics in the 13.6% of the cases (Isolated/loneliness, Weakness, Is "passive", Does not react).

In response to the scenario in which the victim was immigrant, non-immigrant participants named reasons for bullying which were related to the relational status of the victim (Isolation/loneliness) or the bully's relational motivation (Wish to be popular, Wish of power) only in a minority of their interviews: 3.3%. The large majority of the reasons for bullying an immigrant victim, which were provided by the non-immigrant participants, were related to possible victim's ethnic characteristics or immigrant background (46.1%: Ethnic origins, Different language, Skin color, Religion, Different habits, Islamic terrorism), and to racist motivations of the bully (4.6%: Fear of "foreign" people, Racist parental models). The immigrant participants provided a higher percentage (19.8%) of relational explanations for bullying an immigrant victim: The 9% of the explanations

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referred to relational motivations of the bully (To boast of themselves, Fear to be victimized, To hide their own weakness) and 10.8% of the explanations were related to characteristics of the victim: Does not react, Loneliness/isolation, Is helpless, Is annoying. However, also for immigrant participants the majority (43.3%) of the explanations regarded the ethnic characteristics, the immigrant background of the victim (40.6%: Ethnic origins, Skin color, Is different, Different language, Different habits, Comes from a poor country, Somatic characteristics, Religion), or a possible racist background of the bully (2.7%, They feel to be right/to be authorized, Because of parental rules).

Discussion

The present study investigated general and racial bullying by adopting a multi-method approach.

Findings suggested that the immigrant status positively correlated with victimization. This result indicated that also in the Italian context immigrant students are more likely to being victims of bullying, likewise it was found in other European countries (Strohmeier et al., 2011). Bullying towards immigrant peers could also be explained by the availability of immigrant students in the classroom. In other words, victimization of immigrant students could be explained by the ethnic composition of the classroom (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Findings also suggested that immigrant status was not associated with bullying, indicating that immigrant students are less likely to victimize their native and immigrant peers. Given that immigrant students constituted the minority within the schools participating in this study, they might be unlikely to assume a dominant position and bully their peers. Instead, they might have a more subordinate position in the peer group, which would make them an easy target for the dominant and majoritarian (i.e., native students) members of the group (Pratto et al., 2006).

However, we found no significant differences between native and immigrant students in relation to bullying of immigrant students. In other words, immigrant students seem to be equally bullied by their native and immigrant peers. These findings were counterintuitive, as one would expect bullying to

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be more likely between a native perpetrator and an immigrant victim, than between a perpetrator and a victim both with an immigrant background. We may speculate that some immigrant students could be prejudiced and intolerant towards their peers with a migrant background other than theirs. Furthermore, some immigrant students, especially those who recently moved to Italy, could be an easy target for those immigrant students who were born and raised in Italy and are established members of the group. Hence, a need for acceptance and affiliation might explain why immigrant students bully their peers (Strohmeier, Fandrem & Spiel, 2012).

Furthermore, we found that general bullying and general victimization positively correlated with each other, while no association was found between racial bullying and racial victimization. As to general bullying, the current findings suggest that bullying and victimization are interchangeable and that students may act either as bullies or as victims likely depending on the social situations. As to bullying towards immigrant students, the absence of an association between bullying and victimization suggests that the behaviors of perpetrator and target are more definite as compared to general bullying. This finding may be attributable to some individual characteristics interacting with the social context. Being in a minority position, immigrant students might feel vulnerable and threatened by the majority students (Juvonen et al., 2006). However, due to individual characteristics, some of them could be aggressive and dominant; therefore, bullying could have a self-defensive nature for them (i.e., they bully others before being bullied themselves). On the opposite, less aggressive and submissive students could be easily targeted by their peers, both because they are in a minority position and because of their individual characteristics. However, these speculations should be tested in future studies. Both general bullying and racial bullying positively correlated with popularity. Previous findings in the literature showed that students are prone to judge bullying as morally wrong and to intimately condemn it (Thornberg, Pozzoli, Gini, & Hong, 2017; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), notwithstanding they may overestimate their peers' approval of bullying (Sandstrom, Makover & Bartini, 2013). Given that

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adolescents tend to conform to their peers' expectations (Brengen, Markiewicz, Doyle & Bukowski, 2001), it is likely that some students may consider bullying as an acceptable behavior, which could help to increase their popularity within the peer group (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012; Caravita et al., 2009). In other words, bullying could be used to achieve agentic goals related to social power and high social status (Ojanen, Grönross & Salmivalli, 2005). Bullying could be even reinforced by increased popularity and approval by peers (Salmivalli, 2010). Therefore, in a vicious circle, adolescents may persist in their bullying behavior. However, due to the cross-sectional nature of our findings, these speculations should be tested through a longitudinal design. Nevertheless, in the regression models perceived popularity was only associated with general bullying, *not* with racial bullying.

Consistently, even if prejudice positively correlated with both bullying immigrant peers and general bullying, the association was stronger for racial bullying. Furthermore, prejudice had a positive effect only on racial bullying in the regression models. These findings can be explained in light of our theoretical frameworks. Students who bully their immigrant peers could show a strong identification with the national ingroup, along with a tendency to perceive immigrants as a threat for the ingroup (Sthephan & Stephan, 1996; 2000). Cues from the society also affect bullying. For instance, research findings show that since an early age, children evaluate negatively people who do not follow the social conventions and norms of their social group (Liberman, Woodward, & Kinzler, 2017). Adolescents may attach negative characteristics to the outgroup and therefore, being prone to victimize their peers, based on prejudice. However, also socio-cognitive processes, such as social categorization might be associated with bullying. Negative stereotypes (i.e., cognitive representations of culturally held beliefs about a group) might also give rise to discriminatory behaviors towards the members of the outgroup and therefore, foster bullying behavior. Social experiences and socializing agents could also influence the social categorization process and the development of stereotypes. For instance, research findings have documented that early adolescents whose parents and peers manifest high levels of prejudice and

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anti-immigrant attitudes and with low levels of intergroup friendship increase their levels of prejudice over time (Miklikowska, 2017). Altogether, the findings on the associations of type of bullying with status and prejudice provide some evidence that if dominance and status are relevant to explain bullying in general, racial bullying is more consistently explained by prejudice and cognitive distortion at such extent that the association between this kind of bullying and peer status becomes non-significant.

Qualitative findings mainly confirmed these results. Obtaining popularity and power were some of the reasons for bullying same-country and immigrant peers. Adolescents described bullying as a way to gain visibility within the peer group and to demonstrate superiority, power and strength. Several participants described bullying as a way to affirm oneself in the peer group. Bullying others is seen at the same time a way to increase social status and establish a hierarchy with the bullies at the top of it. According to participants' point of view, in case bullies would not affirm themselves through bullying, they might fear of being belittled by the members of the peer group. Nevertheless, when reasoning about the motives to bully an immigrant peer, adolescents mainly provided explanations which were related to ethnic and cultural differences and prejudicial motives, while the explanations related to the peer status were a minority. Hence, participants to the present study reasoned that their immigrant peers might be victimized due to the tendency to perceive them as a threat for the group. Immigrant peers are perceived as not fitting in to the peer group due to their different language, culture and social customs. Overall, participants to this study interpreted bullying as a reaction to the different physical and behavioral characteristics of the victim. The tendency to attribute bullying to the victim is expression of a subtle bias that leads children to view the victims as responsible for bullying. This bias could be expression of the moral disengagement mechanism of victim blaming. Moral disengagement refers to a series of self-serving cognitive distortion leading individuals to selectively avoid moral censure and self-judgement on the actual behavior (Bandura, 2016). Hence, we propose that this tendency to focus

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on the non-conforming features of the victimized peers to explain bullying somehow reflects a cognitive distortion of the reasons for bullying towards a newcomer peer. The strong societal demands towards conformism might lead children to believe that everyone should be aligned to the accepted standards of normativity and that there is sufficient reason to bully those who do not conform (Mazzone et al., 2018).

Correlation analyses suggested that students who were prone to bully their same- country and immigrant peers showed a negative perception of acceptance of cultural diversity. Interestingly, the association was stronger for general bullying than racial bullying, suggesting that for this latter individual's cognitive distortions are more relevant, while general bullying is more strongly influenced by the peer ecology dimension. Bullying could be understood as a reaction to the perception that reciprocal respect is missing at school and that the school environment is poorly inclusive. Students' perception of an environment that does not encourage reciprocal respect and acceptance of others (especially of the minorities) might lead them to perpetrate and likely justify bullying.

Strengths and Limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this study addressed for the first time the contribution of school climate in terms of the perception that the cultural diversity is accepted at school, social status, openness towards other cultures and prejudice to general and racial bullying. One of the main strength of the study is the mixed-method approach, which helped to deepen our gaze into the complexity of the phenomena object of investigation. The random-sampling procedure makes the qualitative study rigorous, while increasing the generalizability of its findings.

Despite these strengths, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings that boys are more likely to engage in bullying could reflect our missing differentiation between distinct forms of bullying (i.e., direct versus indirect). As shown in previous research, girls are likely to engage especially in relational forms of bullying, while boys are more likely to being involved in physical

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bullying (River & Smith, 2004). Future research should test gender differences in relation to general bullying and racial bullying. Second, racial bullying and victimization were assessed through only one item, and the data were cross-sectional. Future studies using more complex measures and assessing longitudinal data are needed to further confirm our results.

Practical Implications

Based on the findings of this study, we may infer that different subgroup of students with bullying behavior may exist. In some students, bullying is associated with high levels of prejudice towards minority groups, while some other students may bully their peers as bullying could be rewarded with high popularity. Successful intervention programs aimed at preventing and contrasting bullying should foster social competence in order to teach adolescents alternative ways to achieve a high popularity within the peer group.

Furthermore, findings of this study indicate that addressing peer status may be not enough in multi-cultural schools, and inform educators, psychologists and social workers on the importance of also addressing discriminatory attitudes in order to prevent bullying towards minority youth. In a growing multi-cultural society, a culture of respect and tolerance towards immigrants should be promoted. We suggest that prevention programs should encourage anti-bullying attitudes, intergroup contact and friendship with minority peers, while counteracting prejudices and stereotypes towards immigrants.

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Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics: Correlation indices, Means and Standard Deviations

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.	Immigrant Status (0 = non-immigrant, 1 = immigrant)	-											
2.	Age Level	-.06	-										
3.	Gender (0 = boy, 1 = girl)	.01	-.05	-									
4.	Racial Bullying	-.01	.07	-.01	-								
5.	Bullying	.07	.14**	-.16**	.50**	-							
6.	Racial Victimization	.33**	-.06	-.01	.04	.10*	-						
7.	Victimization	.11**	-.17**	-.05	.14**	.32**	.52**	-					
8.	Prejudices	-.25**	.11**	-.15**	.12**	.09*	-.06	.03	-				

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towards Immigrants

9. Cultural Openness	.18**	-.13**	.12**	-.09*	-.02	.05	.07	-.41**	-		
10 Perception of Cultural Acceptance at School	.06	-.23**	.10**	-.12**	-.29**	-.05	-.13**	-.12**	.13**	-	
11. Perceived Popularity	-.08	-.02	-.02	.12**	.18**	-.05	-.09*	.02	.06	-.15**	-
12. Social Preference	-.07	-.01	.06	.00	.02	-.07	-.18**	-.02	.06	.00	.45**	-
M	-	-	-	1.07	1.17	1.10	1.23	2.24	3.03	3.17	.003	0.07
(*SD*)				(0.51)	(0.28)	(0.47)	(0.33)	(0.45)	(0.57)	(0.65)	(0.99)	(0.96)

Note. ** = $p<0.01$, * = $p<0-05$, ns = $p>0.051$.

Table 2.

Multilevel regression models.

		General Bullying			Racial Bullying		
		b	ES	*p*	b	ES	p
Within	Gender	-0.07	0.03	.01	0.01	0.04	>.05
	Age	0.02	0.02	>.05	-0.01	0.03	>.05
	Immigrant Status (0 = Non-Immigrant, 1 = Immigrant)	0.06	0.05	>.05	0.03	0.05	>.05
	Prejudices towards Immigrants	0.01	0.03	>.05	0.12	0.05	.03
	Perception of Cultural Acceptance at School	-0.12	0.04	.001	-0. 08	0.05	.06
	Cultural Openness	0.01	0.02	>.05	-0.05	0.04	>.05
	Perceived Popularity	0.04	0.01	<.001	0.07	0.05	>.05
	Social Preference	-0.01	0.01	>.05	-0.03	0.03	>.05
Between	% Immigrants in Classroom	.000	.003	>.05	-.03	.03	>.05
	AIC		123.596			981.914	

Table 3.

Qualitative Data: Micro-categories

	NON IMMIGRANT VICTIM		IMMIGRANT VICTIM	
	Non-immigrant students	Immigrant students	Non-immigrant students	Immigrant students
Bully's characteristics	Feeling to be better (6.8%) To boast of themselves (5.4%) Because of fear to be victimized (5.4%) Bully's family's problems (low SES, abuse of alcol/drugs in the family) (4.1%) No real reasons (2.7%) To run wild (2.7%) Peer support, group bullying (1.3%) Envy (1.3%)	To boast of themselves (6.2%) Feeling to be better (6.2%) Peer pressure/obligation (5%) Feeling good (3.7%) Wish of power (2.5%) Fear of being victimized (2.5%) Envy (2.5%) Chooses only non-Italian victims (2.5%) No real reasons (1.2%) Does not feel well with her/himself (1.2%) Wish of feeling adult (1.2%) To vent their own anger (1.2%) Problems of the bully's family (1.2%) To not be isolated (1.2%) Boredom (1.2%)	Feeling to be better (8.3%) No confidence with the newcomer (2.3%) Fear of "foreign" people (2.3%) Feeling of being "worse" (2.3)% Envy (2.3%) Racist parental models (2.3%) No real reasons (1.1%) Wish to be popular (1.1) Bully's older age (1.1%) Bully's family's problems (low SES, abuse of alcol/drugs in the family) (4.1%) No parental control of the bully's behavior (1.1%) Vindictive bully (1.1%) Wish of power (1.1%)	To boast of themselves (6.3%) No closenesswith the newcomer (3.6%) "To run wild" (3.6%) Feeling to be better (2.7%) No real reasons (1.8%) Machiavellianism (1.8%) Fear (1.8%) They feel to be right/to be authorized (1.8%) Fear of being victimized (1.8%) Because of parental rules (e.g. "Do not hang around with bad people") (0.9%) Revenge (0.9%) Envy (0.9%) Peer support (0.9%) Bully's family's problems (0.9%) To hide their own weakness (0.9%)
Victim's characteristics	Physical appearance (9.5%) Being the newcomer (8.2%) Victim's temper (8.2%) Victim's weakness (6.8%) Isolated/loneliness (6.8%) Linguistic accent (5.4%)	Being the newcomer (8.7%) Physical appearance (8.7%) Victim's temper (6.2%) Isolated/loneliness (5%) Being "different" (3.7%) Is good at school (3.7%)	Ethnic origins (13%) Different language (9.5%) Skin color (7.1%) Religion (Islam) (7.1%) Different habits (7.1%) Being "different" (5.9%)	Ethnic origins (11.8%) Skin color (8.1%) Being different (8.1%) Physical appearance (8.1%) Does not react (4.5%) Different language (4.5%)

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Being helpless (5.4%)	Physical disability (3.7%)	Physical appearance (thinness/obesity) (3.5%)	Different habits (3.6%)
Low SES (4.1%)	Victim's weakness (3.7%)	Being helpless (2.3%)	Comes from a poor country (3.6%)
Difficulties in school achievements (2.7%)	Difficulties in the school achievement (2.5%)	Islamic terrorism (2.3%)	Somatic features (3.6%)
Low popular (2.6%)	Difficulties in (peer) relationships (2.5%)	Physical defects (2.3%)	Isolation/loneliness (2.7%)
Better looking (1.3%)	Linguistic accent (2.5%)	Prejudices towards migrants ("they steal the work") (1.1%)	Being helpless (2.7%)
Style of dress (1.3%)	Does not have hobbies/is "passive" (1.2%)	Being the newcomer (1.1%)	Is the newcomer (2.7%)
Different gender orientation (1.3%)	Being perceived as childish/naive (1.5%)	Isolation/loneliness (1.1%)	Worse school achievements (1.8%)
	Does not react (1.2%)	Indigence (1.1%)	Headscarf (dresses) (1.8%)
	Different gender orientation (1.2%)	Victim's temper (1.1%)	Not fashion/poor dresses (1.8%)
			Poor family SES (1.8%)
			Religion (0.9%)
			Physical disabilities (0.9%)
			Being annoying (0.9%)
			Being good at school (0.9%)