"Judging by the cover": A grounded-theory study of bullying towards same-country and immigrant peers

Abstract

This study investigated students' perspectives about bullying towards same-country and immigrant peers. Thirty-five Italian and immigrant students (age range: 11-15) took part to the study. Participants were probed with two bullying scenarios, depicting respectively a new classmate from another Italian city and from a foreign country. A Grounded Theory approach was adopted to examine participants' perspectives about the motives for bullying. Findings showed that a process of socializing deviance is at the core of both forms of bullying. This social process refers to a series of shared beliefs within the peer group about the victim's deviant features. Three sub-categories related to both forms of bullying emerged from the core concept: (a) Rejecting the newcomer deviance, (b) Rejecting physical deviance, (c) and Rejecting personality deviance. These sub-categories were related to the sub-categories of bullying towards immigrant peers: (d) Rejecting cultural deviance, (e) and Learned racism. Findings are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical relevance.

Keywords: school bullying, racial bullying, victimization, immigrant adolescents, constructivist grounded theory

1. Introduction

In the past three decades, researchers worldwide showed an increasing interest in bullying, which resulted in a progressively more accurate understanding of this phenomenon. The substantial body of literature produced in the social sciences contributed to define bullying as a systematic and repeated behavior aimed at harming a less powerful victim (Smith, Kwak & Toda, 2016). The interplay between several factors related to gender, appearance, race, as well as to the peer ecology and the wider social context affect the prevalence of bullying (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2014). For instance, the social climate within the school context may encourage bullying, as the relationship among students could take a hierarchical structure in which dominance, conformity and competition are the main features (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). Furthermore, students share a series of beliefs within the peer group, which could lead to approving and justifying bullying. In this respect, previous literature described bullying as a form of collective violence towards children who do not conform (Yoneyama & Naito, 2003).

Socializing agents, affecting the dynamics of bullying are multiple and act at different levels. For instance, at a macro-society level, mass media exposure contributes to children and adolescents' aggressive behavior (Ostrov, Douglas & Crick, 2006). In this respect, literature documented that children's television shows contain more displays of physical aggression compared to non-children's programming (Wilson et al., 2002) and that exposure to media violence may lead to a de-sensitization to real violence (Gentile, 2003). Other agents, at a micro-system level directly interacting with the person (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1994), such as teachers and parents, can even be more relevant.

They can influence the dynamics of bullying through a process of normative social influence (Schultz, Tabanico & Rendón, 2008), which leads adolescents to internalize norms of social conduct (Biddle, Blank & Marlin, 1980). For instance, previous literature indicated that teacher and parental expectations to defend the victim of bullying are positively associated with defending behavior (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). Parental moral thoughts and beliefs have also been linked to children's aggressive behavior (Camodeca & Taraschi, 2015).

The interplay between socio-contextual factors and the characteristics of the target may also affect various forms of bullying and aggressive behavior towards peers (e.g., intragroup and intergroup exclusion; Rutland & Killen, 2015). For instance, being a newcomer is a motive of peer rejection and bullying (Adler & Adler, 1995). In this respect, literature suggests that admission to a new group is particularly challenging for newcomers, as peer groups maintain their exclusivity through carefully choosing their members and excluding potential newcomers. A reason why newcomers are excluded is that they lack the amount of information possessed by the established group members, such as a knowledge about the formal and informal rules of the group (Adler & Adler, 1995). In addition, potential newcomers might be perceived as a threat for the group identity (Rutland & Killen, 2011).

Being a foreigner is another feature that contributes to victimization (Teräsajo & Salmivalli, 2003). Previous literature showed that immigrant children are more likely to being called names and excluded due to their cultural background (Monks, Ortega-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Hidalgo, 2008; Strohmeier, Kärnä & Salmivalli, 2011). Social psychological theories attempted to explain the reasons why immigrant children are the target of aggression. According to the Social Identity Development Theory in-group identity emerges early in development and it is related to children's derogation of the out-group (Nesdale, 2004; 2007). Coherently with this theorization, developmental social identity research has shown that the degree of identification with the in-group is related to the emergence of prejudice and bias (Rutland, Killen & Abrams, 2010). Children actively reason about their social world

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and construe the intergroup context considering issues of group identity, group norms and morality (Park & Killen, 2010). However, they often justify peers' rejection based on group membership (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Hence, intragroup and intergroup peer rejection and bullying might be the reflex of prejudices and preservation of group identity (Killen & Rutland, 2011).

Classroom- and school-level factors have been suggested to play a role in intergroup conflict. For instance, the shared prejudices and stereotypes towards minority youth affect episodes of harassment and racial bullying (Özdemir, Sun, Korol, Özdemir, & Stattin, 2018). The ethnic composition of the school also affects bullying; indeed, immigrant children are more likely to being victimized in schools where ethnic minority groups are under-represented (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Social psychological theories have highlighted the role of social contexts (e.g., parents; peers; intergroup friendship) in shaping intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The Social Learning Theory asserts that children and adolescents learn through observation of adults and peers in order to gain their acceptance (Bandura, 1977). In this respect, recent studies suggested that adolescents with more prejudiced parents increase their anti-immigrant attitudes over time (Miklikowska, 2017). Mass media also contribute to perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresented information about different cultures, which can in turn contribute to peer discrimination (Khanlou, Koh, & Mill, 2008).

Although much has been done to understand bullying, little is known about the extent to which the national background (i.e., same-country versus foreign country) of the victim affects bullying. To fill this gap in the literature, in this study, we aim to investigate whether national group membership affects children and adolescents' reasoning about bullying towards a same-country and immigrant newcomer peer. We focused on the Italian context because of the relatively recent increase in immigrant population during the last few decades. Currently, non-Italian residents represent 8.3 % of the population. Twenty-

one point two percent of them are under the age of 18 years (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2016; for details see: www.istat.it), and they attend either Italian regular schools or professionalization courses. As a result, the immigrant student population has been growing and becoming increasingly diverse (Azzolini, 2011). In the school year 2015-2016 immigrant students attending Italian schools were 815000 (i.e., 9.2% of the whole school population). The present study was conducted in Lombardy, which is a region with the highest number of immigrant students in Italy (204000; i.e., 25% of the whole population of immigrant students; ISMU, 2017).

Despite 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. As documented in previous studies conducted in other national settings, immigrant students may be at risk of episodes of discrimination and bullying (Strohmeier et al., 2011). Therefore, investigating bullying towards immigrant peers seems urgent and focusing on the Italian context may better allow to understand how children and adolescents' reason about this phenomenon.

2.   Theoretical framework

The socio-ecological model of human development can help to understand bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). According to this model, the social environment that children experience may be understood as a series of structures each nested within the next (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Beyond the immediate microsystem (e.g., family, peers, school), other social layers affect children's development. The mesosystem provides the connection between the structures of the child's microsystem, (e.g., the connection between the children's teacher and their parents). The exosystem defines the larger social system in which children do not function directly, but which affects the children's development by interacting with some structure in their microsystem (e.g., the relation between home and parents' workplace). The macrosystem may be considered as the outermost layer in children's environment.

This layer is comprised of cultural values, customs, and laws. Finally, the chronosystem includes not only the personal life-course events, but also the socio-historical circumstances (Brofenbrenner, 1994).

In recent years, researchers have underlined the importance of taking into account the social context of bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2014), suggesting that the culture of bullying existing within a school is the result of multiple factors (and layers) interacting between each other. Hence, bullying is not an isolated intrapersonal or interpersonal phenomenon, rather it is a socio-cultural phenomenon whose persistence or desistence depend upon the actions and reactions of peers and adults in the particular social setting in which it occurs (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2014). In line with symbolic interactionism (e.g., Charmaz, 2014; Charon, 2001), Migliaccio and Raskauskas (2014) argue that individual interact with others based on their perspectives of the world and how they define the actual social situation. "Humans act in a world they define, and although there may actually be a reality out there, their definition is far more important for what they *do*" (Charon, 2001, p. 136). Thus, it is crucial to examine students' perspectives and viewpoints as they guide and influence their attitudes and behaviors in various social situations, including bullying.

In this study, we assumed that when interpreting their social worlds, students' views might be affected by their direct (e.g., microsystem; mesosystem) and indirect (i.e., exosystem) social experiences, as well as by societal ideas and standards pertaining to the macrosystem and chronosystem. We assumed that looking at the interplay among all layers might help to understand adolescents' views about the motives for bullying. Furthermore, we assumed that manipulating the victim's national membership could offer a unique opportunity to explore whether children's social experiences and social knowledge affect their reasoning about bullying a same-country and an immigrant peer.

3. The present study

In the past two decades, the phenomenon of bullying had a consistent echo in the public opinion and mass media in Italy; the reason of this trend was partly due to severe self-injurious behavior among students who were victims of school bullying (Fraire, Prino & Sclavo, 2008). Several researchers investigated bullying among Italian students (Bacchini, Esposito & Affuso, 2009; Baldry & Farrington, 1999; Genta, Menesini, Fonzi, Costabile & Smith, 1996; Leoni & Caravita, 2014; Vieno, et al., 2015); however, only a few studies about the phenomenon of bullying towards immigrant peers in Italy have been published (Caravita, Donghi, Banfi & Meneghini, 2016). A potential limitation of previous studies is that their findings were exclusively based on quantitative data, which mostly neglect or may not able to catch children's explanation for bullying.

The starting point of the present study was trying to getting close to the phenomenon of bullying, through the exploration of Italian and immigrant adolescents' perspectives about the reasons for bullying a newcomer peer either from the same-country or from abroad. As outlined above, given the rapid increase of immigration in Italy, it seems particularly important to address the motives for bullying immigrant peers. In this study, we discussed these issues with students, as they are active social agents, who are directly involved in social interactions with their peers; therefore, they may be seen as the best informants about their social lives.

4. Method

5.1 Sample

Participants to the present study were 35 students (17 boys and 18 girls; age range: 11-15), of which 16 attended middle school (sixth, seventh and eighth grade), while the remaining 19 students attended high school (ninth and tenth grade). They were recruited randomly from a larger sample participating in a quantitative study about school bullying. The random selection procedure was independent on students′ actual involvement in bullying. More specifically, the sample of the broader study consisted of 692 students 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). In order to select participants to this study, two lists of the 692 students were created: one list including the non-immigrant students and one list including the immigrant students, in which also the students′ nationality was reported. Both the lists also included information on each student's gender and age group (middle school vs. high school). A random number was assigned to each student in the two lists; subsequently, the numbers of the students participating in the current study were randomly selected from the two lists. Two criteria were introduced in the random selection procedure: (1) The selection of the numbers from the two sub-lists was realized taking into account each student's gender and age group so that both gender and age group were equally represented among immigrant and non-immigrant participants; (2) The nationality of immigrant participants was taken into account, in order to ensure the maximum possible variation among participants with reference to ethnicity. The sample 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). All interviews were conducted in Italian. Participants were first and second generation immigrants (respectively 45.9% and 54.1%) and spoke Italian fluently.

5.1.2 Data collection and Procedure

Data were collected in a middle school and in a high school located respectively in a small city and in a metropolitan city in Northern Italy. Principal and schoolteachers expressed their consent for the research and parents gave their written consent for the participation of their children in the study. Children 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 Ethical committee of the University XX (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).

Two trained Psychology students conducted individual interviews in a quiet room of the school; each interview was conducted alternatively by one of them. Before conducting the interviews, the two Psychology students attended classes to learn how to collect and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. Furthermore, two researchers who are expert in qualitative methods and interview techniques trained the two students to the interview scheme and procedure adopted in this study. The training also included a short session in which an interview was simulated. Moreover, along the whole data collection, the two Psychology students also attended specific supervision sessions with one of the two trainer researchers, in order to discuss any possible difficulty emerging during the interviews and to ensure, that the procedure was consistent across all interviews. During the interviews, two brief scenarios depicting a new classmate being bullied were presented to each participant. The texts of the two vignettes were developed by two researchers who were expert in bullying research and they were based on the literature highlighting the specific features of bullying (i.e., intentionality; imbalance of power; repetition) and that distinguishes among different types of bullying situations, that is verbal, physical and relational (Smith, et al., 2002). The texts of the two vignettes were subsequently discussed and refined in order to ensure that the portrayed situations actually described a bullying scenario and were equivalent.

One of the scenarios depicted a new classmate coming from another Italian city, while the other scenario, depicted a new classmate coming from another country. The two vignettes were presented randomly and included relational, verbal and physical prevarications. The scenarios were formulated from a second-person perspective and matched each participant's gender. The two vignettes had the same structure but differed in accordance with the bold alternatives as shown in the following scenario:

> *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/coming from 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 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?"* Participants were treated as competent commentators (Prout, 2002). 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" and "okay") and taking a non-judgmental approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). 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? In your opinion, how does the girl/boy in the story feel like? How do children who exclude or beat up other kids, feel like? How do the other classmates feel like when things like these happen?). 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 30 minutes and were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim and coded. Data analysis was initiated after all data had been collected.

   5.1.3 Data analysis

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Among the different Grounded Theory approaches, we adopted the constructivist version (Charmaz, 2014), as we started from the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual and constructed by social agents. Hence, a constructivist approach is particularly useful to understand participants' reasoning about the bullying motives. In accordance with this approach, we assume that neither data nor theories are discovered, but rather they are constructed through the interaction between the interviewers and the participants, as well as through the work of the research team (Charmaz, 2014). This perspective about the research process fostered the researchers' reflexivity (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2018). Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1994) ecological development model was used as a sensitizing concept and thus, a loose frame and a point of departure for the analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The data analysis firstly consisted of initial line-by-line coding (see Figure 1). Initial codes were constructed and constantly compared to each other in order to give a similar label to same phenomena. During initial coding, the researcher remained open to exploring whatever theoretical possibility could be found in the data. Through constant comparison of data with data, data with codes and codes with codes, emerging categories were identified. The most frequent and significant initial codes were then grouped into focused codes, which were less open-ended, more conceptual and formed potential categories. Categories and concepts and their properties were generated from the data, rather than being directed by the researcher's hypotheses (Hallberg, 2006). Constant comparison was made between different emerging categories in order to explore similarities and differences in the data. Conceptual relationships between categories were hypothesized and verified (i.e., grounded) in the data during the whole data analysis. Theoretical coding was conducted in parallel with focused coding in an iterative manner (Glaser, 1978, 1998). We explored how focused codes were related to each other and how they could be integrated in a grounded theory. During theoretical coding, relationships between categories were analyzed and categories were combined in order to create an analytical outline of the data (Charmaz, 2014). A core category was identified, which was central to the data and determined the

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emerging conceptual framework or grounded theory (Glaser, 1978, Hallberg, 2006). The whole data analysis process consisted of theoretical reflections, assumptions and notes, which were documented through memo writing.

Using scenarios with immigrant and non-immigrant newcomers can be understood as adopting what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call far-out comparisons as a vital tool in the qualitative analysis in which "making comparisons helps us break away from standard ways of thinking and stimulates the asking of questions about the data as we go along" (p. 82), and by such contrasting be sensitive to properties that otherwise might not have been noticed. In line with a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz et al., 2018), we consulted preexisting theories and read previous published studies about bullying and racial bullying, in a sensitive, flexible and creative way during the whole research process. According with Charmaz (2014), theoretical sampling of the literature was stopped when it did not add new properties to our core theoretical categories (i.e., theoretical saturation).

[Figure 1]

6. Results

The systematic analysis of data generated a grounded theory of socializing deviance in school bullying (see Figure 2) embedded in the ecological model (Brofenbrenner, 1977, 1994). By coding and analyzing the motives that participants to this study mentioned for bullying a newcomer peer, we developed a concept of socializing deviance. Bullying towards a same-country or immigrant peer is the result of a social process in which the victim is depicted as a deviant. Deviance is here understood as co-constructed in that it is a social product of the interaction between distinct socio-contextual layers. More clearly, the peer ecology (e.g., standards of normativity within the peer group) interacts with other socializing agents (e.g., family; mass media) in producing adolescents' beliefs and social behaviors. Preconceived ideas are at the core of both bullying towards the immigrant peer and the

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newcomer from Italy: Both are "judged by the cover" and perceived as deviant. (e.g., "I mean…instead of inviting him and getting to know him better, they judge him by the cover", Italian boy, 11 years-old). According to our theorization, the concept of "deviance" is a socialized concept, as various socio-contextual layers (e.g., peers; parents; teachers) contribute to define the deviant features of the newcomer peer. In our theorization, we use the term "deviance" to signify that the victim is depicted not only as different compared to the members of the peer group, but also that a negative connotation is attached to her "deviant" features. According to participants' perspectives, the victim of bullying presents many features that are perceived as negative (i.e., deviant) because of not-fitting within the peer group. In other words, deviance is in itself bad and worthy of rejection.

The process of socializing deviance involves three sub-categories associated with both forms of bullying: (a) Rejecting the newcomer deviance, (b) Rejecting physical deviance, and (c) Rejecting personality deviance. These three subcategories are then further related to bullying towards immigrant peers: (d) Rejecting cultural deviance, and (e) Learned racism. These last two sub-categories specifically refer to a series of beliefs and discriminatory behaviors that specifically emerged in relation to participants' motives for bullying newcomer immigrant peers.

[Figure 2]

6.1 Rejecting the newcomer deviance

Participants mentioned several motives for bullying a newcomer peer. In particular, students reasoned that "being new" was per se a motive for being bullied. Being a newcomer either from another Italian city or from another country was also interpreted as a deviant position as compared to the already established group members. Students reasoned that given that groups are already formed, newcomers may not be easily accepted. "It could happen because of being new…I don't know…during this stage of our lives, groups are created quickly and the groups don't accept the new one" (Italian girl, 15 years-old). According to students' perspective, bullying and rejection of the newcomer is justified by

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the fact that the potential new member of the group may lack the adjustment abilities needed for admission to the peer group. "Because she's different and she's a newcomer. Maybe there're already small groups and she's not able to get adjusted. She's alone" (African girl, 15 years-old). Being a newcomer is here associated with being isolated, which further co-constructs the newcomer as deviant and vulnerable. Furthermore, the excerpts above express a tendency to blame the victim, as the victimized newcomers need to be able to adjust themselves in order to be socially included and avoid bullying.

In addition, students reasoned about the importance of preserving unity within the group. "Maybe they know each other since a long time; maybe they went to school together and they see this new girl who comes from another place and so they want to stay united because they are scared" (Italian girl, 11 years-old). From the excerpt above, it seems clear that new members may not be accepted, because they are perceived as a threat to the social space of the group itself. In this resepct, peer groups may be seen as closed social entity, in which potential new members may threaten the social ordering (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016).

6.1.1 Rejecting physical deviance

Physical appearance was among the reasons for bullying and rejecting a same-country newcomer peer. Participants attributed bullying to some specific victim's features, such as being fat, being ugly, being weird and wearing strange clothes. "Maybe she's a bit ugly and then, they start to tease her" (Italian girl, 11 years-old). "Maybe it's because she's too fat or too thin or maybe they tease her because she has too much make-up on" (European girl, 13 years-old). "Maybe he's not good-looking and so the others make fun of that or maybe he has some motor problem, he's lame, so his classmates believe that that's a good reason to insult him and make fun of him" (Italian boy, 14 years-old). However, also positive characteristics, such as being good looking were considered as deviant features that could trigger bullying. "It depends on several issues. You know, there are small groups

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within the classrooms and since she is new, maybe they are envious, because she is good-looking or maybe it's just because she is weird". (South-American girl, 14 years-old). We may reason that good-looking students may be considered as a threat for the social status of the dominant group members. These results are coherent with previous research findings showing that students use socially constructed categories in a creative and selective way in order to define whether peers fit within the peer group (Thornberg, 2018).

The reasons for bullying the same-country and immigrant peer were actually highly overlapping. For instance, being fat or physically smaller (e.g., short) were also mentioned as some of the features at the core of bullying towards the immigrant peer. Further reasons for bullying an immigrant peer were related to skin color. Participants reasoned that newcomer immigrant peers with a specific ethnic background may be more at risk of being bullied because of their physical features. "And it's also for the skin color, for your facial features" (Asian girl, 14 years-old). Participants argued that because of these physical features, the victim was different than the rest of the group, which explained why they were bullied. "Maybe his skin color is different, therefore they believe he is different than the others and they just do not accept him" (Italian boy, 12 years-old).

Another feature related to physical appearance that contributed to deviance was related to wearing foreign traditional clothes (i.e., costumes used to represent the culture or identity of a specific ethnic minority group). "You know, […] if I would have come (to Italy) with my traditional clothes, they would have screamed: How do you dress? Buy yourself a pair of Air Max! There are several factors. It's because you're different than them. But, that's unfair" (South-American girl, 14 years-old). Wearing the "right" clothes, in accordance with the dominant norms of the specific peer group, may be seen as one of the prerequisite for being accepted and fit within the peer group. As shown in previous studies, wearing fashionable clothes is a predominant norm for popularity, especially among girls (Thornberg, 2018).

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6.1.2 Rejecting personality deviance

Along with physical characteristics, further features associated with the newcomer personality were mentioned as possible causes of bullying. As a thirteen years-old Italian boy exemplified: "A person is just different, not only esthetically, but also in her personality she might be different than the others". The Italian victim was depicted alternatively as shy, having a different mentality and having a bad or a weak personality. Shyness in particular, was frequently mentioned as a feature that may trigger bullying. "Maybe he's shyer and then, the others tease him" (South-American boy, 13 years-old). This might mirror a tendency within individualistic society to value sociability and extraversion. Further, shy adolescents may have less chances to gain visibility and popularity within the peer group. "Maybe she's shy, she doesn't try to start a social relationship with the others" (European girl, 14 years-old).

The victim was also blamed for her personality features. In participants' view, personality features were intertwined with the group's social closure in affecting bullying. "Maybe there's a group that's already united and he comes by alone and the others pick him on and maybe it's also because he has a bad personality and let others hate him" (Italian boy, 14 years-old). Students may also associate shyness with weakness. In other words, shy peers may be seen as withdrawn and therefore, poorly incline to stand up for themselves. "It depends upon her personality. She's not able to stand up for herself and she doesn't ask for help" (Italian girl, 15 years-old). The victim was also depicted as "being out" or "being a loser" because of her personality. Shyness and weakness again contributed to victimization. Some students even blamed the victim because of her weak personality. "Because this boy is a loser. No one talks to him. He's withdrawn. He has only a few friends. He's weak. He stays on his own all the time. He's not able to stand up for himself. In a way, it's like he's looking for troubles" (African boy, 14 years-old).

Again, the reasons for bullying Italian and immigrant victims were highly overlapping. Among the reasons for bullying an immigrant victim, participants mentioned being shy along with being not

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popular. "Well, I believe it's a matter of personality. […] She needs to show up her personality!" (Italian girl, 15 years-old). "Maybe there is someone who is shyer, who cannot speak well the language and who has troubles getting integrated and therefore, she is poorly known" (Italian girl, 15 years-old). The later excerpt illustrates how rejecting personality deviance (being shy) overlaps and intersects with rejecting cultural deviance (cannot speak the language well and poorly integrated).

6.1.3 Rejecting cultural deviance

The sub-category of cultural deviance specifically applies to bullying towards immigrant peers. Students mentioned simply being from abroad as one of the cause for being bullied. "It's because she is from another country" (Italian girl, 13 years-old). "In general, it's harder to accept a person from another country. It's a big deal for us" (Italian girl, 15 years-old). According to participants' perspective, the immigrant newcomer could be bullied due to cultural differences, ranging from communication problems (i.e., language barrier), to social customs and religion. "He's from another country; therefore, the others believe he's inferior and different from us. He practices another religion. We dislike his language and his religion. All these things encourage kids to tease him and pick on him. (Italian boy, 14 years-old).

According to students' perspective, the newcomer from abroad lacks the information possessed by the locals, which may constitute an obstacle to the assimilation into the host group. In other words, immigrant peers could be unaware of the social conventions of the hosting country, while experiencing a certain behavioral uncertainty in a new context, which might expose her to bullying and rejection. "I think that a person from abroad doesn't know the sense of humor of the host country yet. The way people talk there; the way people hang out; so, instead of helping him to get accustomed, they say: Let's leave him out" (Asian boy, 12 years-old).

Preconceived ideas and stereotypes towards certain specific community and ethnical groups were at the core of the process of rejecting cultural differences. In particular, by analyzing students' motives for

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bullying immigrant peers, it emerged that a tendency to attribute some specific features to peers with certain origins and ethnicity might be at the core of bullying. In this respect, immigrant peers might not be considered as individual, rather they could be judged only as members of a certain social group.

> Ehm…I don't know, maybe they have an idea about that population and ethnicity, which are not good to them. Like, the Chinese people…they are a lot, they steal the job. They (i.e., those who bully) have their own ideas, their own labels and they use them without trying to get to know the person. Or maybe, you dress differently compared to the others…you talk differently, you relate with people in a different way and therefore, you are labeled. You are bad because your ethnicity is bad. That happens without getting to know you. (Italian girl, 15 years-old).

An overlap between cultural deviance and physical deviance emerged. By analyzing participants' point of view, we found that the more immigrant peers deviate from the Western cultural and physical stereotypes, the more they are at risk of being bullied. For instance, facial features may be used as a useful tool for social categorization. "And it's also for the skin color, for your facial features…there's a difference if you come from an Eastern or from a Western country". (Asian girl, 14 years-old). European and Western newcomers were described as more welcomed compared to non-European peers. More specifically, Europeans may have a chance to be approached and judged for their personality, while non-European individuals may not receive the same treatment.

> It depends upon the country…because if you're African, Taliban, Afghan, people like those, you're rejected even just for your physical appearance, rather than for something else…because you're black…so it's basically racism. […] Because if you're black, you're not even considered, but if you're white, then, they might consider you. And it's the same with Asians and things like that. But if a person is from Switzerland…Germany…let's say a person within the European Union…ehm…in that case, it depends also upon the way you're…then, we should be able to let you join the group. (Italian girl, 13 years-old)

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Worryingly, adults and in particular teachers had a role in the process of stigmatizing students, based on their country of origin. This is well exemplified in the excerpt below:

 […] "She (the teacher) said: Well, girls from poor countries generally come from ignorant families, so they are ignorant themselves. Then, she spoke to me: Johanna, don't you wanna say something about that? I felt like she was talking about me. I said that my parents finished the University. Then, I left the classroom and I came back after one hour. [...] What makes me feel annoyed is that people -even teachers! - think that if you come from a poor country, then also your intelligence is poor. […] I felt uneasy with those adults, so I left the school…you know, I was the spokesperson for all my female foreigner classmates who were teased by the other female classmates. Can you imagine that at some point, the teacher asked me: What are you gonna do? Do you wanna be like Martin Luther King? I guess she was a bit ignorant. [...] I took it as a compliment, but I guess it was not. I am really disappointed for the things I hear...especially when they come from teachers...if adults, are like this, imagine how kids could be!" (South-American girl, 14 years-old).

6.1.4 Learned racism.

The process of rejecting cultural differences was intertwined with a tendency to manifest feelings of fear towards immigrant peers. Students reasoned that the negative feelings of fear towards immigrants originated from parental ideas and teaching. Immigrants were judged as potentially dangerous and untrustworthy. However, students recognized that the tendency to judge immigrants negatively was based on preconceived ideas. "Maybe parents are racists, therefore, they taught their children to behave that way" (Italian girl, 13 years-old). Among participants' argumentations for bullying an immigrant peer, we found a sense of mistrust towards people with a diverse immigrant background. Students reasoned that a tendency to mistrust immigrants could have its roots in parental

ideas; however, they also acknowledged that immigrants are often judged based upon preconceived ideas, rather than on actual personal contact.

> I don't know…It's like...if he comes from a country where there isn't a strict regulation, then he could be a bit more of a vandal compared to people who live here, so they say: Let's stay far away from him. It's because our parents say you should keep yourself away from these mean people. So, they think they should stay far away. […] Maybe in his home country, he was one of those who stay in the street and throw firecrackers at people and he was saying bad words for the whole day. But they don't know and instead of going there and asking him, they just keep themselves away and they say: Let's not ask him; let's just stay away. I don't know; maybe they try to let him go back to his home country (Asian boy, 12 years-old).

While in the excerpt above, the boy openly acknowledged parental influence on children's fear, some other students reported more subtle examples describing the role of adults in influencing immigrant fear.

> "So, some time ago during catechism, a missionary priest said that in Bisuschio (a small village in Northern Italy) there was an Albanian who was a robber. My classmates started to laugh and they said aloud: Ahh Sarah! (i.e., this girl is from Albania). But I know that they are playing; I laugh with them, I take it easy" (European girl, 13 years-old).

The excerpt above shows that adults implicitly transmit stereotypes through language, which may contribute to stigmatize some national or ethnic groups, while implicitly increasing the mistrust towards them. A social influence process seemed to be at the core of fearing immigrants. Participants reasoned that negative characteristics are attached to immigrants, regardless of their immigrant background. This tendency to attach negative features to immigrants seemed to be intertwined with the particular historical time that adolescents are currently experiencing. Indeed, a fear of immigrants was

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intertwined with a fear of Islamic people. In this process, adolescents tend not only to model their peers' behavior but they are also influenced by mass media.

"And then, you see the others who behave the same way; you watch the news, you see that one who is an Islamic…even if then, he's an Asiatic, a black - in that case the skin color or richness don't matter - ehm…no, he should go away…who knows, maybe he's not a good person" (Italian girl, 13 years-old).

The discourse about the fear towards immigrant newcomer peers was intertwined with the fear of criminal actions, such as terrorism. In particular, participants to this study linked bullying towards immigrants to the current tensions among Nations and cultural and religious groups. In this process, adolescents seem to be guided by ideas learnt in the wider socio-cultural context.

Because of what is happening…there are people…Also children who see one who's different from us or a black one who comes from, I don't know, from Iraq and they think immediately that he's a terrorist and then, they stay away from him...they tease him, because, I don't know...what's happening is leading us to...They want to scare us. […] So, let's say that if we hear something that we believe it's right, then, we follow it. (Italian boy, 12 years-old)

Again, parental opinions and ideas learnt through mass media seem to interact between each other and reinforce the fear towards immigrants. Interestingly, students also acknowledged that some extremist group's ideas may affect their point of views and beliefs about immigrant people.

It could be that the bully has heard some ideas at home or he watched the news about racism…or that the immigrants steal jobs and then, we should try not to let them come here…or maybe it's because of some extremist group. Maybe it's also because of ideas heard from parents and then repeated like a parrot […] If they are repeating parental or relatives' ideas, they feel proud, because they feel that they are doing something good. (Italian boy, 13 years-old)

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7. Discussion

In this study, we explored students' perspectives about the motives underlining bullying towards immigrant and same-country peers. The findings of this study seem to be coherent with previous studies documenting that during adolescence, social groups are exclusive, since not all potential members who want to affiliate are accepted (Adler & Adler 1995; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016). Peer groups need to maintain their exclusivity through carefully choosing their members and excluding potential newcomers. It may be inferred that newcomers lack the amount of information possessed by the established members of the group, such as a knowledge about the formal and informal rules of the group (Adler & Adler 1995). By the explorative, inductive and abductive grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014), the current findings contribute to elaborate and extend (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) the ecological model (Brofenbrenner, 1977, 1994) as a theoretical framework to understand school bullying of immigrant and non-immigrant newcomers.

The results of this study are consistent with previous literature showing that adolescent perceive the victim of bullying as somehow deviant (Teräsajo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010, 2015, 2018; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). The social construct of deviance might underline the moral disengagement mechanism of blaming the victim. Moral disengagement refers to self-serving cognitive distortions by which self-regulated mechanisms can be deactivated and moral self-sanctions (i.e., feelings of remorse and guilt) can be disengaged, which in turn promoting or facilitating inhumane behavior (Bandura, 2016). Participants to this study tended to attribute the cause for bullying to the negative physical and behavioral characteristics of the victim (Thornberg, 2015).
A social process, involving a tendency to reject deviant peers, to judge the newcomers based on preconceived ideas and a fear of the unknown seem to take place. A possible explanation to how and why adolescents come to define and reject deviance may be found in the concept of "socializing deviance", which guided the formulation of our grounded theory.

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The core concept of socializing deviance explains the process through which children come to attach deviant features to newcomer peers and, therefore, to reject them. According to participants' perspectives, a socialization process takes place behind the rejection of newcomer same-country and immigrant peers. By analyzing participants' discourse, we found that the motives for rejecting a newcomer same-country and immigrant peer were permeated by preconceived ideas, having their roots in the wider socio-cultural context (i.e., they are socialized). The concept of deviance is socialized as, peers, adults and mass media contribute to define the standards of normative and non-non-normative social customs and behaviors. Being a newcomer contributes per se to deviance, as newcomer peers do not fit with the standards of normativity socialized and accepted within the peer group (Thornberg, 2018). The behavioral, physical and cultural deviant features are systematically rejected, based on the socialized ideas of normativity. Interestingly, along with preconceived ideas, also negative emotions (e.g., fear) are socialized, as children openly acknowledged that the tendency to isolate immigrants could be a reflex of parental teaching. Overall, our findings suggest that bullying can be understood by looking at the interaction between individuals and the society, which together shape a culture of bullying (Migliaccio & Raskaskaus, 2014). The tendency to identify a peer as a deviant might be the result of a social construction produced within different social contexts (Wright, Giammarino & Parad, 1986). In other words, the standards of normativity imposed by different sources of influence interacting between each other, such as peers, parents, teachers and mass media, lead to the co-construction of deviance of peers in school. As shown in the excerpts reported above, the victim of bullying either from Italy or from a foreign country is depicted as a peer who does not fit within the peer group. The misfitting (Thornberg, 2018) involves both physical and behavioral attributes.

Being a newcomer from another socio-cultural context might per se constitute a "deviant" attribute. Findings showed that the more far away the immigrant students are from the Italian (i.e., Western) culture, the more deviant they seem to be perceived or constructed by the Italian-native

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students. In particular, students with a certain ethnic background and especially non-European peers might be more at risk of being stigmatized and rejected.

Bullying a newcomer peer from abroad might be connected not only with the closure of adolescent peer networks (Adler & Adler, 1995), but also with the sociological concept of social closure, which could be defined as the process of drawing boundaries between social groups in order to secure scarce resources for one's own group (Murphy, 1988). The members of other social groups might be perceived as a threat to the preservation of some specific resources, rights and opportunities (e.g., employment; citizenship); therefore, they are excluded from gaining access to them.

Furthermore, the tendency to exclude a newcomer from another socio-cultural context might have to do with the impression formation process. The current findings showed that some characteristics such as immorality and anti-social behavior were attached to the immigrant newcomer. Consistently with these findings, recent literature showed that information on the out-group morality is among the primary determinant in social judgment and impression formation (Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro & Ellemers, 2013), as individual perceptions of unknown people tend to select information based on moral values (e.g., honesty; trustworthiness; Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi & Cherubini, 2011).

Although peers have a key role in adolescents' social lives, consistent with previous quantitative findings, participants to this study expressed that parents could be taken as important reference point also during adolescence (Bastiaensens et al., 2016). Moreover, according to the students in the present study, teachers and other adults contribute to devaluate immigrants through derogatory language. Language has been suggested to play a role in stereotype transmission and maintenance (Maas, 1999). Consistent with the findings of this study, parents and educators in particular, have been suggested to transmit bias towards immigrants, through their language (Lieberman, Woodward & Kinzler, 2017). Beyond adults, our data also underline the role of mass media and extremist groups in the process of socializing deviance. As to the first, there remains within the Italian media a tendency to present

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negative stereotypes about certain immigrant groups (Vaes, Latrofa, Vieno & Pastore, 2015). In line with the Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), we assume that a high rate of exposure to mass media is associated with a tendency to interpret the information acquired as representative of reality. High mass media consumers are theorized to depict the world as worse than it actually is, resulting in a general tendency to mistrust the people around them. As to the latter, extremist ideas may be socialized through various socializing agents (e.g., mass media; parents) and ultimately, affect adolescents' beliefs.

Among the reasons for bullying an immigrant peer, adolescents mentioned the fear towards newcomers, especially those who are from a non-European country. As shown above, the sub-category of Learned- racism is expression of a series of preconceived ideas and behaviors specifically oriented at discriminating immigrant peers. Participants' motives for bullying their peers with a diverse ethnic background involved a fear towards the unknown along with a preconceived disliking. In other words, immigrant peers are perceived as unfamiliar and therefore worrisome. Importantly, preconceived ideas and beliefs seem to further strengthen the fear towards immigrant, as they prevent from establishing a social contact with them.

Our data seem to support that adolescents could be provided with a social transmission of fear, which takes place through indirect means of gathering fear-relevant information, such as social observation and verbal communication (Debiec & Olsson, 2017). In other words, the adults' tendency to repeatedly associate immigrant groups with negative attributes and emotions (i.e., fear) may lead adolescents to manifest negative feelings towards foreigners, along with a tendency to avoid and isolate them. In this respect, it is reasonable to speculate that when individuals tend to constantly avoid social contacts with immigrants, as a result, they would perceive immigrants as unfamiliar and therefore as dangerous.

    a. *Strengths and Limitations*

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We acknowledge that adopting the bullying scenarios to stimulate the discussion may have affected the ecological validity of our findings. Although the scenarios administered in the present study were created to mirror the actual episodes of peer bullying, at the same time they may not fully cover the students' real experiences. However, the sample participating in this study was balanced for gender and age, as well as for ethnicity. Furthermore, by adopting an open sampling procedure, we included in our sample students with a relatively different cultural background, which allowed us to maximize variation in our data (Hallberg, 2006; Larsson, 2009). This is valuable in the constant comparative procedure of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Another limitation of the study was that we collected all the data before conducting the grounded theory analysis. In this way, we did not take the advantage of using theoretical sampling in which the ongoing data analysis guides further data collection in an iterative process (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Nevertheless, theoretical sampling of data units was conducted within the data material in order to reach theoretical saturation.

Although covering the variation in students' views enhances the generalizability of our findings, (Larsson, 2009), the transferability is still limited due the number of participants and the restriction to a middle school and a high school located in a small city and in a metropolitan city in Northern Italy. However, we do not claim statistical generalizability for this qualitative study, but rather 'generalization through recognition of patterns' (Larsson 2009) through our conceptual analysis. As in all qualitative studies, also the present study relies on the interpretation of the researchers, which may constitute a potential limitation. However, in accordance with a constructivist position of grounded theory, we do not claim to offer an exact picture, but rather an interpretative portrayal (Charmaz 2014) of school bullying. In order to overcome the limitations of the present study and improve the generalizability of the findings, future studies may adopt a mixed-method approach. Furthermore, the

interviews may be based on children's real-life experiences, rather than on vignettes, in particularly to strengthening the ecological validity.

Despite its limitations, the present investigation was guided by theoretical sensitivity, which reflects the researcher's ability to look at the data in new ways and to exploit the potential of the data for developing theory (Glaser, 1978). The core category fits the salient social process outlined in this study and explains most of the variation in participants' perspectives; i.e., it is able to explain the other concepts and their properties, in a way that most of them are related to the core category *(Glaser, 1978; 1992).* Furthermore, the research process and the theoretical formulations meet the plausibility criteria postulated by Glaser (1978; 1992), as the findings of this study are coherent with previous quantitative and qualitative studies (e.g., Miklikowska, 2017; Thornberg, 2018). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study examining and comparing similarities and differences regarding adolescents' explanations of bullying towards same-country and immigrant peers in a sample of Italian and immigrant students. An important strength point of the present study lies in the possibility to disentangle the influence of the victim's provenience (i.e., native vs immigrant) in affecting students' reasons for bullying. Furthermore, students can be seen as the best informants about their social lives; hence, by analyzing their perspectives it was possible to better understand their own perspectives and social experiences.

7.1.1 Suggestions for intervention programs

Findings of this study clearly stress the importance of educating children to tolerance and respect towards "deviance". As suggested by Thornberg, (2010), the co-construction of victims as deviant and "its underlying logic of conformism and intolerance can, for example, be challenged by pointing out and inviting students into a deliberative discussion about the values of multiplicity, heterogeneity, social inclusion, caring community, and tolerance" (p. 323). The moral disengagement mechanism of blaming the victim (Bandura, 2016) has to be addressed in bullying prevention and

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intervention programs, since the current study together with previous findings (e.g., Teräsajo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2015; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011) reveals how this mechanism is used among children and adolescents to explain and justify bullying. As shown in the findings reported above, the process of socializing deviance is the result of the interaction between different social layers. Therefore, prevention programs should address students along with socializing agents, such as parents and other adults in order to overcome stereotypes and prejudices. Furthermore, ideas socialized through mass media and extremist groups should be contrasted. Adolescents may not have yet developed the critical thinking skills needed to process the information received from parents and mass media. Therefore, prevention programs should improve their critical thinking, while encouraging intergroup contact and friendship.

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Table 1. Examples of Initial coding, Focused coding and Theoretical coding

Interview data	Initial coding	Focused coding	Theoretical coding
Example 1 Interviewer: I wonder how this kind of situation could happen. Participant: Because she is different than the others. She is the newcomer, anyways.	Defining the newcomer as different compared to the others; Being a newcomer	Deviance-defining	Rejecting the newcomer deviance
Example 2 Interviewer: Can you tell me why in, your opinion, the protagonist of the story is picked on? Participant: Because if you have some troubles to socialize with the others, they pick you on. And also, if you are a bit fat they pick you on.	Being picked on because of socializing difficulty; Being fat	Socializing difficulty; Appearance-based bullying	Rejecting personality deviance; Rejecting physical deviance
Example 3 Interviewer: All right. So, what do you think? Why children do these kind of things to a newcomer classmate? Participant: Because he is a foreigner. Maybe he practices another religion. Maybe he has a different skin color; therefore, they think he is different than the others, so they do not accept him.	Categorizing the newcomer as a foreigner; Practicing a different religion; Having a different skin color; Defining the newcomer as different compared to the others; Not being accepted by the others.	Being a foreigner; Cultural diversity; Appearance-based bullying; Deviance-defining; Being rejected	Rejection cultural deviance; Rejecting physical deviance; Rejecting the newcomer deviance
Example 4 Interviewer: Can you tell me why these things happen among students of your age? Participant: Because maybe they hang out with older people, so they	Hanging out with older people; Copying older people's attitudes; Having racist parents; Teaching racism to children	Learning racism from adults	Learned racism

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copy their attitudes, or maybe parents are racist, so they taught their children to behave the same way.			
Example 5 Interviewer: I wonder how this kind of situation could happen. Can you tell me something more about it? Participant: Maybe there's someone who is shyer, who does not know the language. I believe it's a matter of personality.	Defining the newcomer as shy; Not knowing the language of the host country; Relating victimization to personality	Victimization based on personal characteristics; Language difficulty; Personality-based bullying	Rejecting personality deviance
Example 6 Interviewer: I wonder how this kind of situation could happen among students. Participant: Ehm…being from a foreigner country is different than being from another city, because you are Italian in the end. Instead, if you come from India, for instance, they may tease you more and more intensely. He can't speak their own language…or maybe it's because of the religion…it's because of the culture.	Differentiating between Italian and foreigner newcomers; Teasing intensely the immigrant newcomer; Not knowing the language of the host country; Practicing a different religion; Belonging to a different culture	Nationality-based bullying; Language difficulty; Cultural diversity;	Rejecting cultural deviance

Figure 1. Data analysis
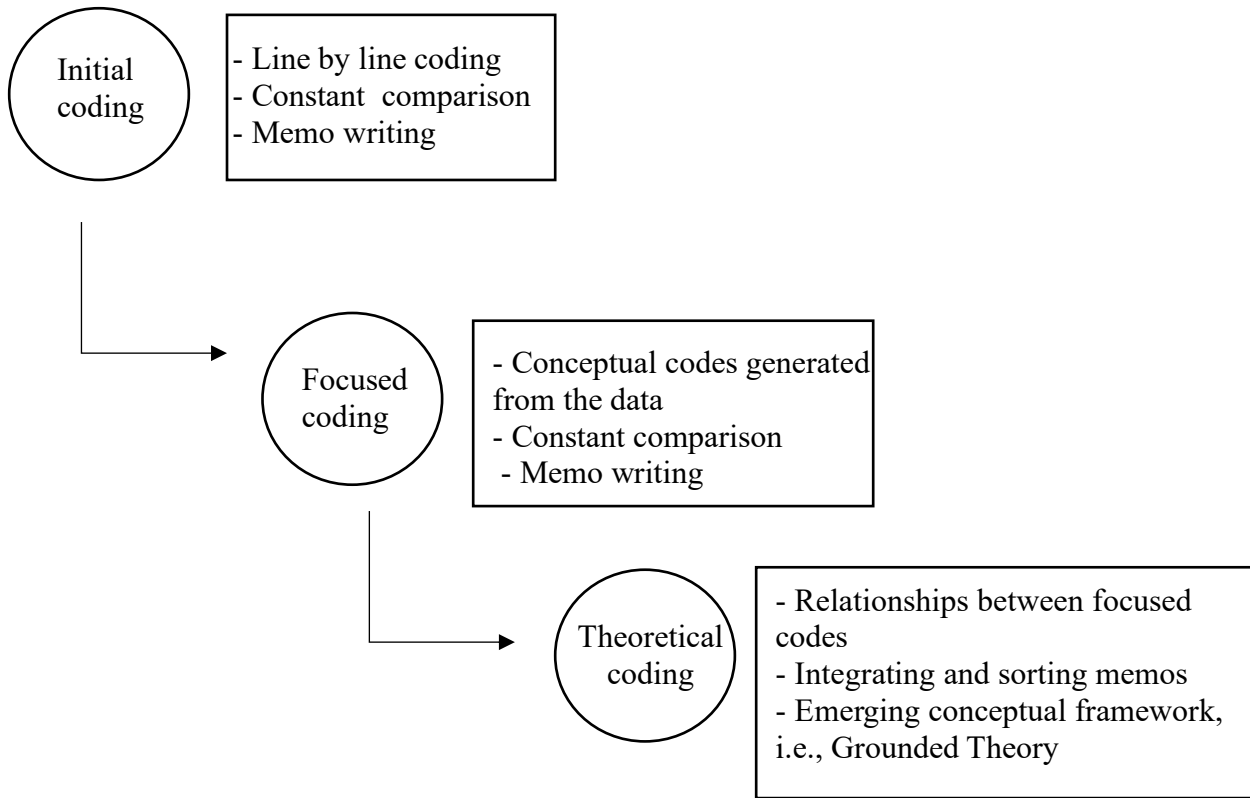
Figure 2. A grounded theory of socializing deviance in school bullying embedded in Brofenbrenner's

(1977, 1994) ecological model
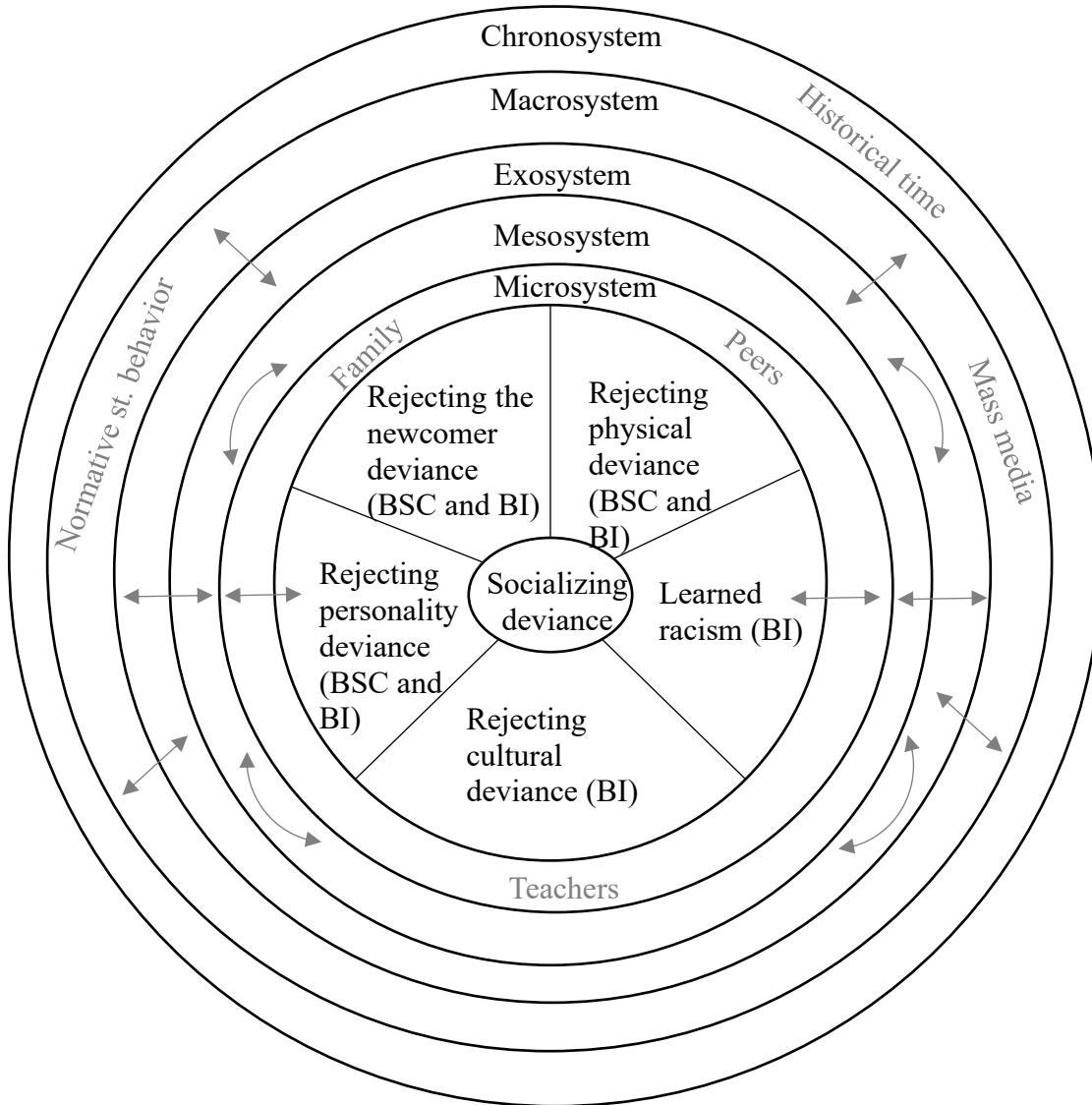
Note. BSC=Bullying towards same-country peers; BI=Bullying towards immigrants; Normative st.

behavior= Normative standards of behavior