Risks of the semantic inflation of "bullying" in the media and the field of education

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Abstract

This paper analyzes critically the discursive practices produced by academic research, the written press and the educational community on the phenomenon of bullying. The empirical corpus is comprised of 3581 journalistic notes from 4 newspapers of the City of La Plata, 60 semi-structured interviews and 9 focus groups with students from secondary schools in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. We defined bullying briefly as an object of study and an approach to analysis, identified how the written press uses the term in its media coverage, and studied the meanings that students construct on the phenomenon in question. From a socio-educational perspective, we identified on the one hand a discursive convergence that deploys an individualizing and stigmatizing view of violence in schools, and on the other hand we observed a semantic inflation of the term bullying to name different situations that exceed the phenomenon in question. We conclude that is necessary to be cautious in using this word, and that certain assumptions from this perspective may contribute to shape performatively what they postulate analytically.

Key words: violence – high school – mass media – young students.

Introduction

The term *bullying* has become increasingly widespread in Latin America to refer broadly to a variety of situations of violence that take place in the space of the school. Its use has expanded widely in the media and in some specialized professional environments. However, the problems we have referred to as *bullying* in Spanish call for a specific delimitation of the phenomenon of violence in las schools, and embodies a particular analytic approach.

We argue that it is necessary to be cautious in the use of this word and of certain premises of its perspective that may contribute performatively to forge what the postulate analytically.

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Words express different meanings depending on the uses and contexts in which they are uttered. The simple everyday act of naming something or someone contributes to give it or him/her an entity and define it as such depending on who does the naming (Bourdieu, 2014). In this article we intend to analyze what we understand as bullying in the academic field as well as which uses and meanings are constructed around it by the media and the actors of the educational community. First we will explore briefly the research on bullying, considering its delimitation as an object of study and the theoretical-epistemological approaches to its study. Then we will address how the written press has used the term in their media coverage of situations of violence in schools. Thirdly, we will analyze the meanings that actors of the educational community, especially secondary school students, have constructed about this phenomenon. Finally, we will interpret the interweaving of meanings between the academic environment, the media, and the perception of the individuals who go through our schools.

The empirical material presented is part of three qualitative research projects[1] conducted within the "Transformaciones Sociales, Subjetividad y Procesos Educativos" research program directed by Dr. Carina V. Kaplan at the Institute for Research in Educational Science of the University of Buenos Aires. The secondary source corpus is comprised of 3,581 journalistic notes from four newspapers (*El Día*, *Hoy*, *Diagonales*, and *Extra*) of the City of La Plata, the capital of the province of Buenos Aires, published between 1993 and 2011. The data were treated according to the framework of socio-educational discourse analysis (Martín, 2014).

The primary source corpus is comprised of 60 semi-structured interviews and nine focus groups with students of four public secondary schools between 2012 and 2016. Two of the schools are located in the town of Avellaneda and the other two in La Plata, province of Buenos Aires. The interviews were analyzed following the guidelines of thematic analysis, which involves the recognition of patterns among the data where the emerging issues, in our case in reference to bullying, become analytic categories (Fereday, Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Bullying as an object of study and as an analytic approach

The first research work on bullying appeared in Scandinavian countries in the early 1970s after students who claimed to have been mistreated by their classmates committed suicide. The original term used in those studies was *mobbing*, a word taken from the field of ethology that alludes to a collective assault by a group of animals against another animal from a different species, usually larger than them (Olweus, 1996).

After the proliferation of these studies in Great Britain in the 1980s, the term was replaced by that of *bullying* (Smith, Sharp, 1994). In the 1990s, this type of research work grew in the United States and several European countries, with Spain becoming a referent for Spanish-

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speaking researchers (Cerezo, 2009; Ortega, Mora-Merchán, 1997; Trianes, 2000). Although in Latin America such studies started more recently, in the last decade there have been a number of research projects in different countries in the region (Román, Murillo, 2011; Herrera-López, Romera, Ortega-Ruiz, 2018). There is no exact translation to Spanish of the concept, which has been expressed alternatively as *hostigamiento* (harassment), *intimidación* (intimidation), *abuso* (abuse) or *acoso* (stalking/harassment) among peers.

This brief reference to the genesis of the concept is pertinent to trace the roots upon which the approach to bullying was built and its object of study delimited. Initially inspired by ethology, this approach drew mainly on categories from the field of experimental psychology, closer to biology, which studies issues related to the behavior of individuals.

Dan Olweus (1996), one of the pioneer researchers in this field, argues that "a student is subjected to harassment when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions by one or more students" (1996: 360). According to this author, an example of negative behavior is the explicit intention to cause damage to or bother someone physically, verbally or psychologically. Thus, the phenomenon of bullying is defined by three characteristics: *a)* the intention of one or several persons to hurt another; *b)* the reiteration of this behavior through time, and *c)* the existence of a power imbalance in the interpersonal relationship between the harasser and the victim. Del Rey and Ortega (2007) add a fourth characteristic that they call the "law of silence"; that is, that "the people involved, directly or indirectly, tend to stay silent about what is happening, which makes it more difficult to stop" (2007: 78). Smith and Sharp (1994) synthetize these situations as a systematic abuse of power.

In this approach, the concept does not encompass aggressions that do not necessarily take place systematically among the same students, or between those whose relationship of force may be considered symmetrical. Under these premises, a great number of situations of violence that also take place in schools fall outside the scope of research (di Napoli, 2018).

Starting in his early research work, Olweus (1998) has designed an anonymous and self-administered questionnaire (*The Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire)* about harassment and victimization, which has been adapted and reproduced in several studies conducted in different countries (Menesini, 2009; Ortega, Mora-Merchán, 1997; Resett, 2011; Smith, Sharp, 1994; Zequinão, Medeiros, Pereira, Cardoso, 2016). Based on his results we may propose a few general considerations. Among the most common forms of abuse are first insults and offensive nicknames, then blows, physical aggressions and theft, and thirdly threats, rumors, and social isolation. These studies conclude that the number of victims of harassment decreases as students move on to higher grades; that is, bullying is more present in the first years of schooling.

The dynamics of bullying is focalized in a three-role play. First there is the figure of the victim, who is subjected to harassment, and then the aggressor, whose behavior is that of intimidation. The third role is that of those who are witnesses or spectators of the harassment, but

do not participate directly in it (Del Rey, Ortega, 2007; Olweus, 1996). However, the distinction between victim and aggressor is not always clear. Zequinão *et al.* (2016) mention that there is a relatively high combination between author and victim, an ambiguity that does not suggest a clear differentiation between these roles. Olweus (1996) and Ortega Ruiz (2006) refer to the existence of "proactive victims" or "victimized aggressors", that is, students who participate in both positions at different times.

Research on bullying addresses interpersonal relationships predominantly through psychological aspects and aspects of the personality of the individuals involved, without framing such relationships in a wider context of interdependence. A great deal of research (Castillo, Pacheco, 2008; Castro, 2013; Cerezo, 2009; Defensor del Pueblo, 2007; Farrington, Lösel, Ttofi, Theodorakis, 2012; Menesini, 2009; Olweus, 1998) offer, with few variations, a characterization of the typical psychological profile of victims and aggressors. They generally describe victims as insecure, anxious and submissive, while harassers show a pattern of aggression based on the need for power and domination, the satisfaction of causing harm, and the goal of taking control of the victim's possessions.

The application of the questionnaire created by Olweus (1996) in different parts of the world has allowed researchers to consolidate this data collection instrument, making it possible to make comparisons between different countries, and even conduct the few longitudinal studies that have been done on the issue of violence in schools. However, as Paulín (2015) points out, one of the difficulties of these searches lies in the validity of the operational definition of what is considered to be violence.

The use of the term 'bullying' in the media

Based on a socio-historic study of the coverage of violence in schools in the written press of the city of La Plata between 1993 and 2011, Saez (2019) identified that the representation of violent episodes between students homologates different situations (fights, intimidations, killings). It is only in 2008 that violent situations between students began to be called "bullying". This coincided with the time when Herrera-López, Romera and Ortega-Ruiz (2018) observed a quantitative leap in the publication of research on bullying in Latin America (from one publication in 2007 to ten in 2008), which has continued to grow until at least 2015 (with 47 articles found).

However, if we stop to look at each one of the cases referred to in the journalistic notes, we notice that not all of them fit the definitions proposed by researchers mentioned above. We outline as an interpretive hypothesis that there has been an *inflation* of this term. Likewise, this amplification corresponds to the development of a commercial vein, whether in the editorial market with books that, as in a set of do's and don'ts, determine if "your child is a thug or a vic-

tim" or in new business units of companies, NGOs or foundations who offer, for instance, insurance against bullying to schools[2] or training workshops for teachers.

In the period we analyzed we observed the convergence of a discourse that reduces the issue of violence to individual actions, without taking into consideration the wider institutional and socio-cultural spheres (Kaplan, 2008b). Such a way of presenting the issue is reinforced with the representation of the links between the students in terms of victims and aggressors.

Bullying as a novel event

The term "bullying" makes visible a hitherto unheard-of form of violence among peers that is clearly increasing in the country, as the following mentions show.

> The phenomenon of *bullying*, the new violence among kids (*El Día*, 30 January 2008).
>
> "*Bullying*" is, according to these data, a phenomenon on the rise, since a decade ago the number of victims of aggression did not exceed one or two of every ten (*El Día*, 6 October 2004).

This modality of violence is presented in a spectacular way and associated to an emotional discourse. These modes of communication are frequent to make social facts visible (Saez, 2020). In the case of bullying, it is presented as follows:

> FEAR IN THE CLASSROOMS (*El Día*, 24 November 2011).
>
> The room of panic (*El Día*, 5 March 2009).
>
> A product of the society in which we live, school violence has become one of the many nightmares with which inhabitants of big cities must deal in an almost daily basis. Fights between classmates, insults and even harassment between peers – "bullying", they call it – surprise us (*Hoy*, 22 May 2009).

Psychopathologization of school life

Bullying as a perspective that circulates in the media discourse has symbolic effects on the representation of the actors who inhabit the educational space. The ways to designate this form of violence between peers refer to the area of health and highlight it as a social disease, an epidemic that is difficult to cure and whose symptoms may be psychopathologically identified in students, as in these notes:

> Harassment at school: more frequent at the beginning of secondary school. It is a more common scourge among male students (*El Día*, 5 April 2011).
>
> A SILENT EPIDEMIC (*Hoy*, 10 May 2009).

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2 *Clarín*, 13 October 2014. "Venden seguros contra el bullying a los colegios". http://www.clarin.com/sociedad/Venden-seguros-bullying-colegios_0_1229277361.html

THE SYMPTOMS. Which symptoms should be paid attention to in order to prevent this kind of harassment? According to Vázquez insomnia, sudden mood changes, unmotivated crying, sadness, depression or lower grades are some of the warning signs we should pay attention to (*El Día*, 5 April 2011).

The appearance of bullying in the press took place through the *authorized discourse* of science. This has a connection to our interpretive hypothesis about the inflation and the commercial vein of the term. In the corpus of notes analyzed, a mention of outside sources of legitimation of the information appears recurrently. A number of studies and agencies, such as the Program for International Evaluation of Students (PISA) (*El Día*, 10 June 2011), a citation from UAM professionals (*El Día*, 2 November 2011), a study of the United Nations' Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) (*El Día*, 2 November 2011), and research work published by UNICEF. It is important to highlight this aspect because, as Bourdieu (2006) points out, it is part of the strategies in the struggle for the monopoly of scientific authority; i.e., the technical capability and social power to speak and act legitimately. These sources operate by legitimizing the narrative that there is more violence in classrooms and that it is necessary to change this situation.

A concern arises about which practices are being taken for granted by legitimizing discursive practices when using international studies and agencies as sources of information. The construction of violence in the school space through reports and studies of external agencies suggests considering how, from an international perspective, certain fields of action are being proposed, and how the order of things and the field of the possible are structured in the experiences of violence in the school space. We must underscore the need to be careful and have a great deal of caution when an approach and a terminology are translated mechanically into our contexts. In this act of giving voice to studies that originated in other places and dismissing or not presenting those conducted nationally and the voices of professionals from the schools, a view on violence that is comparable to other societies is being produced because Argentinian society is being discussed in the same way as other societies. On the other hand, external studies are tacitly being authorized more than national ones. In this respect, it is necessary to recover the individual-society relationship that these discursive practices manifest and take for granted. These narratives seem to assume a homologation of the social configurations (Elias, 1999) in which individuals live, since the analyses of violence in the school can be translatable.

The experts quoted are only physicians or psychologists: a pediatrician (*El Día*, 3 July 2011), physician specialized in child psychiatry (*El Día*, 3 July 2011), a psychologist specialized in adolescence and the family (*El Día*, 2 November 2011), Equipo Bullying Cero Argentina (*El Día*, 24 de noviembre de 2011), a psychologist specialized in childhood and adolescence behavioral disorders (*El Día*, 9 May 2011), and an expert in school violence (*El Día*, 24 November 2011) whose

profession is not specified. This corresponds with the disciplines that lead the research on bullying we saw above, basically psychology and medicine interlinked in the area of mental health.

Thus, we wonder what the effects are of the journalists appeal to scientific discourse to underpin their positions in the media discourse on bullying.

The "neutral" utilization of studies, without a theoretical critique of preconceived "data" or without linking them to the construction of the object of knowledge, has given rise to inquiries into this phenomenon that only systematize common sense. Thus, the discursive practices of the La Plata press present scientific voices as authorized discourses to describe and prescribe bullying.

The media view on how bullying operates

The media discourses describe a "methodology" of how this phenomenon takes place. Coinciding with the studies described above, the coverage typifies the facts as repetitive behavior that involves intimidation, tyrannical attitudes, isolation, threats, insults to a victim or victims already marked as such. This is how they do it:

> "*Bullying*" begins to manifest subtly, through jokes and hazing, becoming increasingly more cruel (mocking, kicks, shoves). Once the aggressor controls the victim, he/she also controls the group (*El Día*, 6 October 2004).
>
> Unlike occasional conflict, aggression within harassment at school is accompanied by the expectation that this kind of attack is likely to be repeated (*El Día*, 5 April 2011).

This way to describe the phenomenon alludes to a dynamic with fixed roles: victim or harassed, aggressor or harasser, spectators and followers, where most of them are male. This aspect coincides with research on the subject. Some evidence:

> There is a critical moment in harassment at school: the first years of secondary school. This is what specialists point out, adding that it is a scourge whose protagonists are most often – both as victims and as aggressors – male students, and that it affects the whole courses, since the situations associated to this problem leave traces both on their protagonists and in those who witnessed them (*El Día*, 5 April 2011).
>
> While yesterday people still spoke of the case of the girls who had a fight on Facebook and one of them ended up being stabbed, several specialists consulted by this paper admitted that violence among younger students is a growing problem that often places adolescents as either victims or aggressors (*El Día*, 24 November 2011).

The following infographic make this view more visible:

Infographic 1. The circle of bullying

El círculo del bullying

El hostigado o "buleado": si no puede defenderse ya sea física o verbalmente seguirá siéndolo hasta que otro tome su lugar o hasta que pueda haber una intervención de un adulto.

El hostigador o "bulero": es el que idea el hostigamiento y no siempre es el que lo ejecuta. Decide cuáles son las reglas. Es el líder del grupo (el capito, el top, el popular) y tiene necesidad de demostrar fuerza y poder.

El personal de la escuela: los maestros, los preceptores, los directores, el conductor del micro. Son los que deben detectar el bullying e intervenir inmediatamente.

Los espectadores: pueden tomar distintas actitudes. Están los que miran sin decir nada (la mayoría silenciosa); los que se ríen de lo que pasa; y los que intentan detener el hostigamiento ya sea directamente o reportándolo.

Los padres: son los responsables de detectar cambios en sus hijos y conversarlo con las autoridades del colegio.

Los seguidores: son los que apoyan al líder. Soportan el hostigamiento, y muchas veces lo ejecutan y los que festejan. Sin ellos el bullying no tendría sentido para el líder (para ser popular tiene que haber otros que lo idolatren).

Source: *El Día*, 24-11-2011.

The harassed or "bullied" one: if he cannot defend himself physically or verbally, he will keep on being harassed until someone else takes his place or until an adult can intervene.

The harasser or "bully": the one who plans the harassment, not necessarily the one who carries it out. He decides the rules. He is the group leader (little *capo*, top dog, the "popular" one) and needs to show strength and power.

The school staff: the teachers, the coaches, the principal, the bus driver. They are the ones who must detect the bullying and intervene immediately.

The spectators, who may adopt different attitudes. There are those who look on silently (the silent majority), those who laugh at what is happening, and those who try to stop the harassment by either intervening directly or reporting it.

The parents, who are responsible for detecting changes in their children and discussing it with the school authorities.

The followers, who follow the leader. They support the harassment, and often carry it out and celebrate it. Without them, the bullying would mean nothing to the leader (to be popular, there have to be others who idolize him).

In their characterization they mention the aggressor's motivations – "needs to show strength and power" – (*El Día*, 24 November 2011; *El Día*, 10 September 2010) and the sequels for the victim in harassment situations.

As we mentioned above, this is a terminology that has not been constructed in the field of education or pedagogy but that originated in other fields and finds it difficult to respond to problems within the school environment. This approach to bullying tries to construct a typology of victims (students who are insecure and helpless, among other characteristics) and aggressors (controlling, group leaders, little *capos*, top dogs, the "popular" ones, who need to show strength and power, etc.) by reinforcing the binary coupling of victim and aggressor. These supposedly intrinsic qualities of a boy or girl act as predictors of the individual's behavior in the social world.

Students and how bullying operates

The media view establishes a clear association of bullying with the availability of technology for young people often described as an "addiction to videogames" (*El Día*, 5 March 2009). As other notes say:

> While fights in school do not cease, Internet sites that promote disputes among adolescents multiply (*El Día*, 24 November 2011).
>
> For years now, television culture has shown instances of mocking the other, underscoring his/her vulnerability. Somehow what we have seen with [Marcelo] Tinelli and others has *enabled* this mockery within the school environment (*El Día*, 10 May 2009).

Thus, thus phenomenon made visible as "bullying" mutated into that of "cyberbullying" or "online harassment" with the expansion of these practices into the social networks, where the symbolic boundary of inside and outside the school became more blurred: "Classrooms and social networks, two environments of youth aggression" (*El Día*, 24 November 2011).

According to the experts quoted by the press, the new forms of communication offered by the Internet make a violence that already existed in private environments visible.

> *CYBERBULLYING.* According to specialists, bullying takes place when there are no adults around, repeatedly, and usually in school, although with the expansion of new technologies such as the Internet or mobile telephones it also continues outside the educational environment. "Before, the child arrived home and felt safe, since the victim believes that no one can help him/her. But now the harassment continues through the Internet, the chat, social networks, and text messages. What they call *cyberbullying*, is nothing but the same bullying", observed Kelly (*El Día*, 5 April 2011).
>
> Besides creating groups in social networks with the intention of attacking others, another frequent method is to log in to private websites to write insults or mockery under pseudonyms. Some initiatives

include creating Fotologs of others with the same aim. It is easy to find in YouTube many videos of fights in classrooms, schoolyards, or in the street (*El Día*, 24 November 2011).

What the specialist says about school violence is also part of the violent universe that day by day affects our society. According to a number of studies, young people's use of the Internet and technology has been distorted lately by the bad tools of mobile phones, social networks or online video platforms, which have led to the creation of a new way to scare and terrorize, turning thousands of young people every day into harassed people through new technologies. Several studies conducted worldwide reveal that more than one third of young people have experienced or been the victim of cyberbullying (*Hoy*, 24 October 2010).

Against crime and harassment today for a safer Internet. In five continents, today is International Day for a Safe Internet. The event warns and prevents against "cyberbullying" or harassment through the computers that kids use in schools, and repudiates racist and child pornography contents in the web (*Diagonales*, 6 February 2009).

The consequences mentioned are many and range from the emotional and physical to the fatal. It is highlighted that victims may have hallucinations, and victims are described as weak, psychotic, with "self-lockdown disorders", and "addiction to videogames". They claim that they may have a psychotic outbreak or kill their classmates.

Addiction to videogames has caused concern worldwide. […] Their kids have suffered harassment at school – bullying – throughout elementary school, they see them as too weak to cope with the world, and they overprotect them". They do not impose boundaries because they fear how they may react. "You hear the news and there comes a moment when you don't know what to do," Juan's father confesses. "We were afraid that if we took away the computer or the television he would turn to drugs. I spoke to my wife and we opted for what we believed was the lesser evil". Rotenberg adds: "There is always someone in the family who is complicit, who brings food and looks after him/her. The kids end up being little (or big) tyrants in their home, but when they are made to go out they may decompensate, have a psychotic outbreak, and if forced, even kill someone" (*El Día*, 5 March 2009).

"I have a case of a woman who adopted her child as a baby. She felt that he belonged to her and transmitted her distrust of the world to him," says Rotenberg. "That kid dropped out of school, does not leave his room, and says that if he is forced to go to school he will kill all his classmates. I am working with his mother and grandmother, and we have managed to get him to study with private teachers at home" (*El Día*, 5 March 2009).

"Kids with self-lockdown disorder feel a great deal of distrust of the world, they feel that anyone may hurt them." […] "In another case I went to a home and had to deal with a kid who threatened his mother with a knife so she wouldn't let me in. The key is to be constant: when they see that you don't go away, they let you into their life and into their family" (*El Día*, 5 March 2009).

This kind of violence has mostly emotional consequences (51% of the cases), but also physical ones (13%). Minors who have suffered cyberbullying also start getting lower grades (13%), isolate socially (6%) and skip classes because they are scared (3%) (*Hoy*, 22 May 2009).

That is what experts say about this problem, which was also at the center of the news due to the case of a 12 year old boy from Temperley who killed himself with a shot to his head. Some of his family's testimony pointed towards the school, claiming that the boy (Víctor Felette) had been harassed at school by some of his classmates in the Physical Education class that he did not want to attend anymore. There are however more complex aspects in this case which are being investigated, and the role played in it by the alleged school harassment is not entirely clear (*El Día*, 5 April 2011).

STRESS AND DEPRESSION. "One of the most common clinical profiles that originate in *bullying* is depression", explained pediatrician Flavia Sinigagliesi, member of the Center for Research into Psycho-Neurological Development (CIDEP) (*Hoy*, 22 May 2009).

What is also interesting here is how the press presents extreme cases that led to death.

Solutions proposed to situations of bullying

Along with this typology of the qualities of the harassers' character, the solutions proposed by the media discourse prioritize moving the "victim" to a different school. Following the prevailing individualizing view, no proposals that include working with the educational community are made. These are some examples:

In my first years of secondary school I suffered the constant aggressions of a group of classmates with whom I sometimes tried to get along but from whom I never got any other response than harassment. At first I thought that that nightmare could be reverted with the passage of time, but it grew worse every time and I had to change schools (*El Día*, 10 May 2009).

THE CHANGE OF SCHOOL. "If the school does not become aware of the risks of school violence, and no progress can be made in that direction, then the solution is to change the kid who is being harassed by his/her classmates to another school and give him/her psychological assistance", explained professor Mariana Kelly, from the Team Zero Bullying (*El Día*, 10 September 2010).

"The case of Matías – a kid who, after being harassed by his classmates throughout elementary school, managed to ask for help and change to another school – moved the participants in the workshop (*El Día*, 10 September 2010).

Likewise, this form of violence in the media discourse connotes a criminological bias. School harassment is defined as criminal behavior:

Governments, companies and institutions from over 150 countries hold today the International Day for a Safe Internet to warn against '*cyberbullying*' or school harassment on the web, and also to sensitize parents, educators and minors about the existence of risks in the web, as well as to promote a respon-

sible and safe use of the new technologies and avoid criminal behavior such as school harassment (*Diagonales*, 2009).

It is important to stop and analyze these prejudiced and criminalizing claims. Bullying is a category that under this discursive operation associates young people, harassment, and crime, leading to a judicial treatment of social and educational life.

In the discourse of the press of La Plata, bullying is described with an "apparent ideological and political neutrality of the naturalized category of bullying through which the social issue is essentialized" (Kaplan, 2014: 2). It is presented as an individualizing phenomenon without placing the discussion on the relational, on the historical dimensions and the contexts on which biographies are anchored and find their explanation and meanings. Following Carina Kaplan, we may argue that there is a line of historic continuity between the central thesis of biological determinism (or biologicist racism) and bullying. Broadly speaking, both approaches coincide in claiming that we are born violent or not violent, with or without a tendency for social coexistence.

The perceptions of the actors of the educational community

The inflation, diversification and semantic abuse of the word *bullying* make its meaning elusive also for the actors of the educational community. The imprecision and "confusion" of the media is reflected on the responses of the students of the four secondary schools where we conducted our field work.[3] When we introduced ourselves in the schools and told them that we worked on issues of conflict and violence in schools, it was common that the agents of education (administrators, teachers, and assistants) responded by saying "Of course, you work on the issue of bullying" or "Ah, you are studying bullying". In the case of the students, when the issue – which had not been included in advance – came up in interviews, we asked them what it meant. They often said that they did not know "very well the meaning of that word", "because they tell you many versions".

> *P: What does bullying mean?*
> H: That the person is violent, doesn't care about the others, supposedly is addicted to alcohol or drugs, that the person abuses others without thinking about them, only thinks about himself, has a very large ego, is popular. (Héctor, 5th grade, School 1 – Avellaneda).
> C: It is like abusing, humiliating the other person, bothering him, beating him, all the time.
> *P: And who said that?*
> C: The principal, but we don't see it that way. He's a common kid who has his problems. Maybe he comes here and takes it out here. He takes it out here in class and well, we are here (Camilo, 5th grade, School 1- Avellaneda).

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3 At the end of each testimony we will mention the student's name (in the case of individual interviews), the grade they are in, the school and the town where it is located).

L: They tell me many things. Bullying is the aggressive one, the one who beats inferiors or things like that. I can't understand it clearly because they tell you many versions.
P: And do you see it like that?
L: In things we do, but… I think that … Bullying is having a disease.
(Luciano, 5th year, School 1 - Avellaneda).

In the students' narratives we may see how the socially installed media discourse on bullying described above manifests itself. The problem is associated, rather than to a socio-relational interweaving, to individual behavior or personality traits, calling the individuals "violent", "out of control", "addicted", among other adjectives. Luciano's last phrase shows very clearly the perspective from which this phenomenon is perceived and understood on a common sense level. It is no longer a type of harmful interpersonal link but a disease of the individual who abuses.

When speaking about the situations of violence that took place in the school, some students mentioned cases that they typified as bullying:

P: You say that in the morning classes there is bullying. What is bullying for you?
E: When they abuse kids who are different – not necessarily different, but different from oneself, and that affects them. For example, this kid who was told that he was gay was really affected by this, I saw him crying, and he had to change to a private school (Helena, 5th grade, School 2 – Avellaneda)
E: What other situations of violence could you mention?
A5: I knew a girl, from another place, who was my cousin's classmate, three years ago. Well, the girl was chubby, she was very nice … she is very nice, but they began to tell her a lot of things on Twitter, on Facebook, they made her life impossible.
B3: They bullied her.
E: Was that bullying?
A5: Yes, and all the school made fun of her and, well, the girl wound up being anorexic and now she is in rehabilitation, because she took it very badly and wound up … wound up doing harm … wound up harming herself, being anorexic, bulimic.
E: You say that she dropped out from school?
A5: Yes, yes, she dropped out.
(Focus group, 6th grade, School 3 – La Plata).

In these cases, both extremely serious, there were students who were abused repeatedly by a group of classmates either within the school or on online social networks, causing them profound subjective harm that led them to change school or drop out. On the one hand, we could say that the two cases fall within the classic definition of bullying used in academic research. On the other hand, the students' narrative exposes the difficulty found by schools to address these situations pedagogically, with changing schools or dropping out as a common outcome, as told in the testimony cited by the press.

However, the term is also used by the students themselves to describe another type of situations such as the interaction between teachers and students, or family links that take place outside school.

> *P: You were just talking about bullying. What does bullying mean for you?*
> Joaquín: I think that the word 'bullying' refers to school harassment, but we also use it outside the school when we speak of, I don't know, a brother harassing another, well, he is bullying him because we don't say "he harassed him this or that way".
> Luis: Can I go out to recess?
> P: *Yes.*
> Matías A.: He's going to see his girlfriend, he's whipped.
> Cristian: Come here quickly, my love.
> Joaquín: We also use it every day: "Uh, you are bullying" or "he was bullying this guy".
> (Focus group, 5th grade, School 4 - La Plata).
> A2: There's a teacher that they're always … always bullying.
> *P: They're always bullying?*
> B3: No, we're not bullying him…
> A2: The Geography teacher.
> B3: We tease him, but it's not bullying, no…
> A2: Yes, we do …
> A3: Well, at the beginning we were bullying him, now we like him a little more, we feel kind of bad.
> B2: Yes, because he's really nice.
> *P: What is bullying for you?*
> B1: They threw balls of paper at him [others speak at the same time].
> B3: Bullying is beating, bothering, saying… all to the same person.
> A2: And we did it with the teacher. We still do it sometimes, but with another one …
> B3: Me too…
> A5: I think there comes a time when you feel pity …
> B2: You feel pity.
> (Focus group, 6th grade, School 2 – Avellaneda).

The youths themselves recognize that nowadays they use the word 'bullying' to refer to very different actions and situations. In the focus group of the sixth grade students of School 2 there was an argument among the students over whether their behavior towards the teacher or what "they do to him" may be called bullying. This case, for instance, could not be framed as bullying through the conceptual aspect discussed in the first section of this paper, since they are not referring to a link between peers. However, the imprecision that operates in hegemonic social discourse makes any type of trouble, fight, or situation of violence, be typified as bullying.

In one of the schools in Avellaneda (School 1) we ran across a group that actually called themselves "*Los Bullying*". In fact, once the students knew we were in the school doing interviews for our research one of them told one of us: "you have to interview me because I am a

Bullying". Faced with that situation, besides conducting individual interviews, we decided to have a focus group with those students (Focus Group 5th grade, School 1 – Avellaneda). Based on this case, we were able to notice some symbolic-subjective effects of the common sense hegemonic discourse constructed and circulated in the media.

The case of "Los Bullying"

It is no coincidence that a student introduced himself as "*a bullying*" and that he was part of a group that called themselves "*Los Bullying*". That name emerged when the school's former principal, in one of the many times they were called to her office, told one of them that he "had early signs of bullying". He told us how it happened:

> L: The principal told me right away that I had to change to the afternoon classes because she was afraid that I had early signs of Bullying. […] And I tried to take it easy, like saying "O.K., that's what she thinks," I know I'm not like that. I tried to take it like something funny. It's not funny, what she told me, ha, but I tried to take it more lightly, as if it was a joke. And that's when we began to call what we do, we began to call ourselves "Bullying". They began to call me Bullying… they said "eh, Bullying, Bullying, Bullying". And then all of us, all the group began to call ourselves "Bullying".
> P: Not just you but the group…
> L: Now we are "Los Bullying" [laughs].
> (Luciano, 5th year, School 1 – Avellaneda).

When the former principal imputes Luciano "early signs of bullying", she assigns to him a discrediting attribute (stigma) based on personal traits (Goffman, 2006). She "diagnoses" him, in medical parlance, as a young man with psychopathological problems, justifying his behavior without placing him within a broader social context of interrelationships in which it takes place. Thus, the responsibility falls upon the student, without reflecting on the school's institutional dynamics and the role of the teachers and authorities. Although Luciano accepted gracefully the label placed on him by the school's authority, he incorporated the notion of *bullying* as a disease.

Although the students in this group take the term jokingly and try to turn it into a group emblem, they also show some concern at being pigeonholed within the school as what they consider "true bullying":

> P: Let's go back to the topic of bullying… Do you know what it means?
> Some of them: Yes.
> H: A person who abuses others and does not care about the other person, who insults without trying to hurt people.
> N: A constant aggression towards another producing psychological damage or other consequences. It's that, the damage to others. Like burning someone's head.

G: It may not be only physical but also verbal. They tell us that it's more verbal, we don't beat anybody. That's what they tell us.
P: Ok, they tell you this that you're telling me?
S: Tell told him that [nodding towards Luciano].
G: No, and some days ago they also told us that.
N: Because they threw a paper ball at the teacher's head.
S: They threw, well …
P: Who threw it?
L and H: Him [pointing to Sergio]
S: No, but then they threatened us.
H: Because we told him … the prank was to throw a little paper ball like this [*hand gesture to show something small*]. I made a paper ball and the prank was to throw it at her [*imitates throwing it*]. No, he went PUM! [*gestures a hard throw and the paper ball hitting the teacher's head. They all laugh*]. It made her head spin, it killed her. Left a bump like this on her head.
N: Every time he does something like that we tell him not to do it because then they say that we are really bullying because … [*they all speak at the same time, it's not clear what they say*].
(Focus Group 5th year, School 1 – Avellaneda).

Both the label imposed by the former principal and the punishment they got, such as repri-mands or the prohibition to leave the classroom during recess, reduced the problem to a dicho-tomy victim/aggressor, innocent/guilty, healthy/unhealthy that does not permit addressing it in its complexity, but rather contributes to reinforcing and fixing the students'"profiles" and roles.

In this framework, it would help to recall Bourdieu's contribution (2012, 2014) to the study of school and social taxonomies, which as symbolic acts of classification are instruments for practical knowledge that help structure our perception of the social world and the meaning of our actions. Naming what students are or do is a productive act that has a truth effect on their subjectivation experiences. They run through them in the construction of their identity and self-esteem, and may have an impact on their school and social trajectory (Kaplan, 2008a).

Imposing a name implies assigning someone a social essence through which an identity is institutionalized. Thus, "the act of institution is an act of communication, but of a very specific type: it notifies someone of his identity, in the dual sense of expressing it and imposing it by expressing it before the others, […] thus notifying him with authority what he is and what he has to be (Bourdieu, 2014: 103).

It is a power that, by enunciating, also contributes performatively to construct the world named.

Conclusions

Throughout this article we have characterized and interpreted discursive practices in academic papers, the written press, and the educational community on the problem of bullying. From a socio-educational analysis approach, we identify a discursive convergence that deploys an indi-vidualizing view to explain the phenomenon.

We have observed how the media presents a simplified version of research results, articulating them with common sense maxims. This causes scientific categories that acquire public knowledge and popularity to become part of the substratum of common knowledge, decontextualizing or distorting their original meaning. We should keep in mind, following Bourdieu (2014), that given its social recognition, scientific knowledge has a symbolic effect that tends to enshrine whatever it points out. The utilization of terms and concepts originated in the academic field constitutes another resource, an argument, in the struggle of social classifications to impose a certain view of the social world.

A significant finding of our work was precisely the identification of a semantic inflation of the term 'bullying' as a discursive operation in journalistic coverage and in the discourse that circulates in schools. After the diversification and abuse of the word, any type of conflict, malaise or situation of violence may be typified as such.

Based on a psychologicist imprint, discourse on bullying focuses its explication on the behavioral and psychological dimension of aggressors and victims, interpreting their behavior as individual pathologies. Thus, as we saw in the extracts from the written press, some of the professionals consulted raise the possibility of detecting or foreseeing who has tendencies to be "thugs or victims" depending on the disorders that afflict them. In particular, we believe that the construction of typical "profiles", which become stereotypes, provides explanations of an individual order on the way the students behave, without reflecting on the context in which the intersubjective relationships take place and the meaning that young people give to their actions. Also, by centering the causes of the problem on personal attributes, the responsibility falls on the victim for his/her "lack of social skills", and the aggressor, for his/her "domineering arrogance".

This kind of approach supports a criminalizing view when some studies (Farrington *et al*., 2012; Olweus, 1996) argue that it is possible to predict that young people who harass others have a clearly higher risk of lapsing into other reprehensible behavior such as crime and drug abuse. Linking some student behaviors to "probable" criminal actions is an incitement to criminalize youths (Kaplan, 2014). Likewise, the criminological imprint of the discourse on bullying may also be observed in the legislation in some countries where they equate situations of school harassment with criminal felonies, promoting judicial rather than pedagogical resolutions (Campelo, 2016).

The pathologizing discourse essentializes the social behavior of youths and individualizes responsibilities, anticipating a social stigma that falls on the students typified as "harassers" or "harassed", a characterization from which they cannot easily detach themselves later. We could see this happening in the group of students who called themselves "*Los bullying*" after that label was imposed on one of them by the principal. The basic assumption is that violence is a given property and an intrinsic way of some individuals or groups to relate to each other. However,

coinciding with the findings of other researchers (Kaplan, 2013; Paulín, 2015), we believe that violence in schools is associated to certain material, symbolic and institutional conditions of production; that is, that it takes place within a social macrocosm.

Although this approach considers the asymmetrical power relationships among students, it isolates the conflict by reducing it to a rationale of victims, aggressors, spectators, and followers. Some researchers (di Napoli, 2020; Mutchinick, 2018; Paulín, 2015; Kaplan, 2017) argue that this approach leaves out different forms of micro-violence that do not revolve around specific cases or students, but that emerge as a product of the interaction between the different peer groups.

Our research work is relevant because it is one of the first studies in Latin America that link the media discourse, the perceptions of the actors of the educational community, and the academic discourse on the phenomenon of bullying. It is important to highlight that the analysis presented here allows us to reflect on the problems and challenges of the greater visibility of the school and its actors in the different realms of discourse, and their effects on the meaning of school life.

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