

Bullying situations in the academic context: perceptions of speech language undergraduate students

Situações de bullying no contexto universitário: percepções de estudantes de um curso de fonoaudiologia

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: Bullying corresponds to situations of verbal and physical aggression that occur intentionally and repetitively against an individual who is disadvantaged in power, causing numerous problems and sequels throughout a lifetime. It can manifest itself in different environments, among them, in the university context. **Objective:** To identify the perception of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences' by undergraduates about bullying. **Method:** Descriptive-exploratory study, in which subjects were approached through a semi-structured questionnaire. Data was analyzed quali-quantitatively, through content analysis (open questions) and simple frequency (closed questions). **Results:** Among the 94 respondents, 59 (62.7%) identified situations of bullying at graduation: in the veteran-freshman relationship (20); motivated by the characteristics of weight (20); by sexual orientation/gender (13); in the teacher-student relationship (09); motivated by academic performance (08); social class (07) and ethnicity (05). Regarding academic performance, 91 (96.8%) consider that the victim has a loss in their academic performance: it causes psychological distress and emotional exhaustion (36), demotivation and lack of interest in college (25), social isolation and repression of expression (13); affects general well-being (10) and daily performance (04). **Conclusion:** Students recognize the occurrence of the phenomenon in the context of graduation and agree that such situations affect the teaching-learning process.

KEYWORDS: Bullying; Students; Universities; Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences.

Resumo: Introdução: O *bullying* corresponde a situações de agressões verbais e físicas que ocorrem de maneira intencional e repetitiva contra um indivíduo em desvantagem de poder, causando inúmeros problemas e sequelas durante toda a vida. Pode se manifestar em diferentes ambientes, dentre eles, no contexto universitário. **Objetivo:** Identificar a percepção de graduandos do curso de Fonoaudiologia sobre o *bullying*. **Método:** Estudo descritivo-exploratório, no qual participantes foram abordados através de questionário semi-estruturado. Os dados foram analisados quali-quantitativamente, através de análise de conteúdo (questões abertas) e frequência simples (questões fechadas). **Resultados:** Dentre os 94 respondentes, 59 (62,7%) identificaram situações de *bullying* na graduação: na relação veterano-calouro (20); motivada por características pessoais (20); por orientação sexual/gênero (13); na relação professor-aluno (09); motivada por desempenho acadêmico (08); classe social (07) e etnia (05). Em relação ao desempenho acadêmico, 91 (96,8%) consideraram que a vítima têm prejuízo em seu desempenho acadêmico: provoca sofrimento psíquico e desgaste emocional (36), desmotivação e desinteresse pela faculdade (25), isolamento social e repressão da expressão (13); afeta o bem-estar geral (10) e desempenho no cotidiano (04). **Conclusão:** Os estudantes reconhecem a ocorrência do fenômeno no contexto da graduação e concordam que tais situações afetam o processo de ensino-aprendizagem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bullying; Estudantes; Universidades; Fonoaudiologia.

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INTRODUCTION

The word bullying originates from bully, which means brawler, bossy, or ruffian¹. It is a current topic, increasingly addressed in the media and studies by educators². Countless initiatives can be identified in society to understand it and diminish its negative impact on educational institutions, including universities^{3,4}.

This phenomenon can be understood as a form of aggressive, repetitive, intentional violence by one or more persons against another in an unequal power relationship⁵.

Aggressors are quite likely to maintain aggressive practices throughout their lives, possibly adopting antisocial and even criminal behaviors, while victims can develop psychological, social, and emotional problems. Moreover, those who witness it feel uncomfortable with the unsettling environment, afraid they might be the next target, thus decreasing their overall development⁶.

Studies address bullying in the context of child and adolescent education^{7,8}, but few focus on young adults at university.

The literature on health education identifies some critical periods in university life, commonly characterized by conflicts that emerge from adapting to the environment and making decisions, which can affect academic performance and adequate participation in different contexts in life⁹.

In a previous study, health professors and students from a public university identified different forms of interpersonal violence (bullying) in the undergraduate setting, listing the many diversified categories of existing violence. Both students and professors blamed violence in the undergraduate context for the difficulties and lack of adaptation among students and professors, impairing the teaching-learning process¹⁰.

It can be supposed that this type of violence in universities importantly interferes with academic adjustment and performance. Hence, a greater understanding of this phenomenon can furnish important elements to address issues university students have to cope with throughout their undergraduate journey.

Thus, this study aimed to identify the perception of undergraduate speech-language-hearing students regarding bullying in the academic environment.

METHODS

This study was submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Clinics Hospital of the Medical School of Ribeirão Preto at the University of São Paulo (HCFMRP-USP), under number 8663/2014. All participants were informed about the research and signed an informed consent form.

The context of this research was the undergraduate speech-language-hearing program at XXXX, established

in 2003, with one 30-student class per year, and full-day activities, lasting 4 years. All students in the 4 years of the program were invited to participate. A paper questionnaire was administered in 2019, which participants took approximately 10 minutes to answer, not interfering with their routine academic activities.

The questionnaire used in this study had been applied before to other students in the same unit in previous research¹⁰. It has two parts: identification (sex, age, and the term they were attending) and bullying situations (three closed-ended questions with answer options and two open-ended questions for personal reports).

In quantitative terms, the research obtained the simple frequency of occurrence of these categories and the answers to the closed-ended questions. In qualitative terms, content analysis was used as the strategy for open-ended questions, categorizing them according to the frequency of occurrence¹¹.

RESULTS

The study sample had 94 undergraduate speech-language-hearing students – 93.61% (N = 88) females and 6.39% (N = 6) males –, representing 71.21% of all students in the program (N = 132). Their mean age was 21.3 years (minimum of 17 and maximum of 32 years).

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the number of students who identified bullying situations and the different terms in the program. It was verified that 59 participants (62.7 %) identified bullying situations during their undergraduate studies. Those in the third year identified the most occurrences (72%).

Out of the 59 students, 37 (62.7%) reported that bullying situations occurred sometimes, followed by 18 (30.5%) who said they occurred rarely and four (6.8%) students who said they always witnessed such situations. Those in the third year reported the most occurrences (Figure 2).

Chart 1 presents the following six categories of bullying reported by the students: “Bullying due to personal characteristics”, “Bullying in the senior-freshman relationship”, “Bullying due to academic achievement”, “Violence in the professor-student relationship”, “Bullying due to social class”, and “Bullying due to sexual orientation”. Bullying due to personal characteristics and in the senior-freshman relationship were the two most cited categories.

Chart 2 shows the five student-reported interference situations caused by bullying, among which “It causes psychological suffering and emotional distress” and “It gets people discouraged and uninterested in college” were the most cited ones. The following situations were also pointed out: “It leads to social isolation and hinders expressiveness”, “It affects overall well-being”, and “It affects everyday performance”.

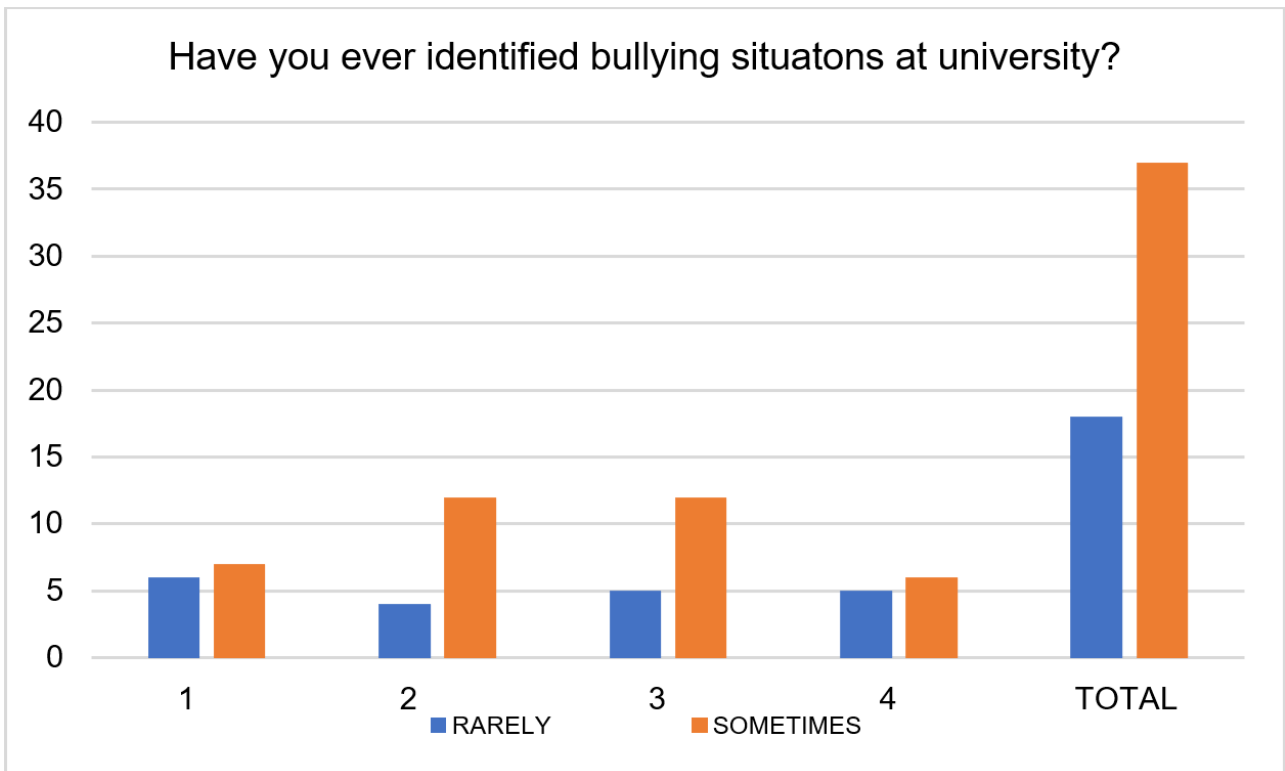


Figure 1 - Identification of bullying situations at university

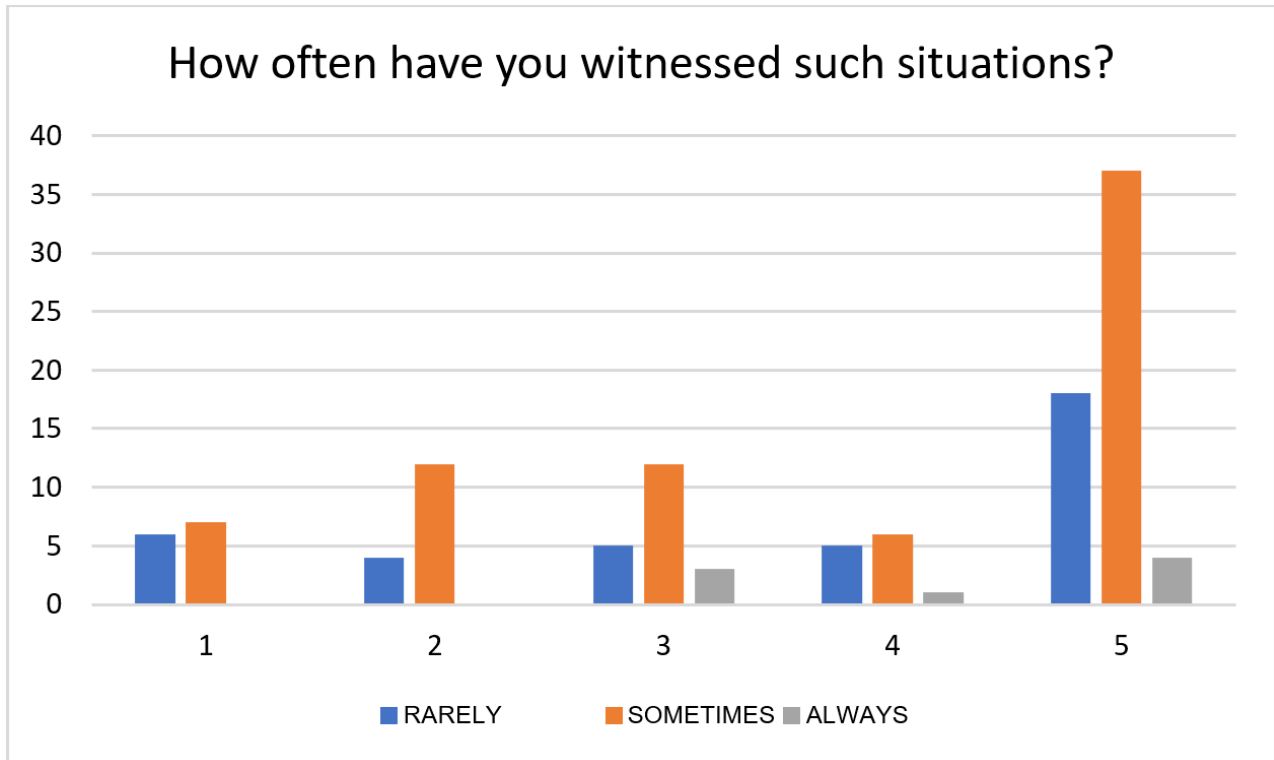


Figure 2 – Identification of the frequency of bullying situations at university

Chart 1 – Bullying situations reported by students.

Bullying due to personal characteristics	29
<p>“Sometimes, people are differentiated based on beauty standards”.</p> <p>“Classmates end up being excluded because of their way of being and expressing themselves”.</p> <p>“A classmate isolated herself from the rest of the class because they victimized and despised her for her physical traits”.</p> <p>“When he talks about physical appearance and everyone else makes fun of it”.</p> <p>“When a girl does not meet the beauty standards people expect”.</p>	
Bullying in the senior-freshman relationship	11
<p>“Making derogatory remarks about freshmen, trying to depreciate them”.</p> <p>“They (seniors) force others to wear adornments, and when someone is not wearing them, the seniors get mad and say they will not help them with difficulties at college”.</p> <p>“When seniors and freshmen are talking in groups”.</p> <p>“Students despising other ones in the same program but in lower terms”.</p>	
Bullying due to academic achievement	7
<p>“Because of learning difficulties”.</p> <p>“People with learning difficulties ridiculed by their classmates”</p>	
Violence in the professor-student relationship	4
<p>“We’ve already seen two professors in the program embarrassing students”.</p> <p>“Professors from other programs saying in class that women should stay home cooking and taking care of the house...”</p> <p>“I’ve already witnessed professors having negative behaviors”.</p>	
Bullying due to social class	3
<p>“Frequent bullying about a disadvantaged financial condition”.</p> <p>“When you have a disadvantaged financial condition, both students and professors treat you differently, thinking you’ll not be able to do the activities ...”.</p>	
Bullying due to sexual orientation	2
<p>“Classmates making fun because of sexual orientation and educational stand”.</p> <p>“A classmate talking about another one, ‘She’s a dyke. Gross!’”.</p>	

Chart 2 – Student-reported interference situations caused by bullying.

It causes psychological suffering and emotional distress	29
<p>“I believe the interference with academic performance is due to all the stress it caused... It can affect self-esteem and trigger depression”.</p> <p>“Because this type of aggression affects the student’s psychological stability, as they suffer and are forced to cope with shame etc.”.</p> <p>“Bullying hurts people psychologically, and sometimes physically too. To perform well in whatever they do, people must be”.</p> <p>“Because it affects people emotionally and interferes with them. The student gets psychologically shaken”.</p>	
It gets people discouraged and uninterested in college	22
<p>“It discourages the person to go again to a place where they suffered bullying. They lose heart”.</p> <p>“The person may end up with no stimulation at all. They’ll not want to go back to college because they know they’ll suffer there”.</p> <p>“People often don’t want to go to college anymore because of it”.</p> <p>“It discourages the person to go to college. The person gets psychologically shaken and ponders whether they’ll have to cope with such situations...”.</p>	
It leads to social isolation and hinders expressiveness	13
<p>“You don’t feel comfortable at college any longer”/“You get discouraged about going to class and being with others”.</p> <p>“Because the person gets embarrassed and isolates from others, which can interfere with group work and even make them drop out of college”.</p> <p>“Bullying affects self-esteem and self-confidence and can discourage people or make them uninterested in the academic context”.</p>	
It affects overall well-being	9
<p>“...It triggers problems in the victim not only at college”.</p> <p>“The concern with well-being becomes the priority, instead of the academic activities”.</p>	
It affects everyday performance	4
<p>“The person does not feel comfortable in the place”.</p> <p>“The person can feel inferior, repressed, unfit to participate in the group, uncomfortable in the setting as if they were disturbing”.</p>	

DISCUSSION

Bullying is practiced in all cultures and, it is greatly prevalent in schools. It has recently gained increasing attention and interest in developing countries as well, such as Brazil and Mexico, for causing emotional suffering (due to the psychological circumstances of power abuse), decreased self-esteem, isolation, and impaired learning and academic achievement. Thus, it is necessary to learn the behavioral characteristics of students targeted by aggression and intimidation, as they can help victim-protection initiatives^{12,13}.

The results of this study demonstrate that undergraduate speech-language-hearing students suffered bullying, as 59 of them (62.7%) had identified situations that can be defined as bullying. Studies conducted at medical and health schools worldwide verified a great prevalence of bullying among peers, thus demonstrating the urgent need for taking measures to address the situation^{14,15,16}.

This study also showed greater occurrence among students in the last years than in the initial ones. This result may suggest that students who have been longer at university have been exposed more often to this type of situation¹⁷.

Many times, victims acquire characteristics caused by the violence they suffered, including insecurity, low self-esteem, social isolation, and severe behavioral disorders – which often irreversibly impair them and influence their academic achievements¹⁸. In the results of this study, students report their belief that suffering this type of violence interferes with the victim's academic performance. Such violent situations among peers raise concern about possible associated situations, such as the lack of adaptation, motivation, and consequent academic and professional failures, besides the considerable costs to their mental health and sociability¹⁹.

The disparity of power in bullying situations reported by undergraduate speech-language-hearing students may be

explained by physical (height and weight) and emotional differences. Moreover, aggressions can be verbal, using nicknames, insults, and racist, homophobic, religious, physical, and economic remarks²⁰.

Considering that the research involved a university, higher education institutions have an essential role in identifying such situations that occur in them, instructing aggressors and victims, providing specialized psychological support, and especially raising awareness of this population about this topic^{21,22}. In 2016, the 54th Brazilian Conference on Medical Education in Brasília discussed and listed strategies to strengthen student health support services (strictly necessary in the violent context of health profession schools), originating “The Letter of Marília”²³.

Since then, higher education institutions have significantly increased their engagement to address these situations, although much progress still needs to be made to systematize more effective internal policies.

A limitation of this research is that it did not survey whether this population had gone through bullying situations before the study, indicating suffering from previous experiences. Another important limitation is that it encompassed the speech-language-hearing program of a single institution – although subsequent studies have been planned to use the same instrument in other higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

Students recognized the occurrence of bullying in this undergraduate program and agreed that such situations negatively affect students.

This study, unprecedented in the field of the speech-language-hearing sciences, is greatly important for health profession education, as it helps locally diagnose bullying situations and plan preventive measures against it at university.

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