

## Chapter 9

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# Bullying and *Ijime* in Japanese Schools *A Sociocultural Perspective*

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### JAPAN'S PUBLIC DEBATE ON SCHOOL BULLYING

Since the middle of the 1980s, school bullying has received much attention as an emerging social problem in Japanese society. For example, in 1986, national newspapers and popular TV shows presented accounts and discussions of nine separate incidents where students reportedly committed suicide as a consequence of group bullying in school. In some cases, the public was presented with the students' suicide notes, which described their anguished cry for help. Since the early 1980s, numerous articles, reports, and books concerning bullying in schools have been published. According to Takatoku (1999), more than 1,200 papers and more than 400 books on this topic were published between 1985 and 1998.

A highly dramatic and widely publicized case of school bullying occurred in 1986 in a junior high school located in Tokyo: A 13-year-old student hanged himself and left a despairing suicide note accusing several boys of having created a living hell for him. In one instance when he came to school, he found that the *Ijime* group leaders had placed his desk in front of the class and arranged a mock funeral including burning incense, his photograph, flowers, and a condolence card that had been signed by most of his classmates, some other boys, his homeroom teacher, and three other

teachers. Through this arrangement, he was made to understand that in the eyes of his classmates and some of his teachers he was somehow a failure as a human being.

This case demonstrates—in extreme form to be sure—some distinctive features of *Ijime*. Guns and knives are not in evidence. Instead, *Ijime* is in most cases a form of psychological intimidation or terror perpetrated by classmates and peers against mentally weaker, or merely different, victims. In the case of this 13-year-old boy, several of his teachers actually participated in the bullying, although this is unusual. When his father, after a series of prior nasty *Ijime* incidents directed against his son, contacted the homeroom teacher, the police, and the parents of the lead bully, he was merely advised that his son should change schools. Thus, many victims of *Ijime* feel themselves abandoned by their teachers who, in one way or the other, may merely counsel them to “endure.” Other teachers and school principals remain ignorant of *Ijime* incidents or are inclined to hush them up in order to protect themselves and their school’s reputation in the eyes of the public and their administrative superiors. *Ijime*, then, may be embedded in a school’s culture and not merely represent individual acts of a group of students. Moreover, *Ijime* usually takes on less dramatic forms than those used in the case described earlier, such as name calling, relentless teasing, shunning, and other forms of social isolation.

In spite of Japan’s extensive public discussion of school bullying and school avoidance, it should be kept in mind that Japanese schools remain much more peaceful places of group interaction and work than most American schools. Japanese homicide rates, including homicide rates for teenagers, remain among the lowest of any industrialized society, although rates for juvenile crime and school violence have been increasing since 1995 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 1999). Students do not have access to guns; at Japanese schools hard drugs are only very rarely in evidence, discipline remains strict in most cases, school regulations are extensive, and drop-out rates remain relatively low in comparison to most other industrialized countries. The teachers are well trained, well paid, and enjoy relatively high status although their position has become more controversial in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The students spend numerous hours together in a work-oriented environment. Thus, Japanese society became extremely concerned about school bullying in the 1980s *not* because Japanese schools were especially violent in nature, but precisely because the more extreme bullying incidents stood out in an otherwise achievement-driven, highly structured, conformist, demanding, and often stressful environment.

As a matter of fact, bullying began to increase at an alarming rate even as school violence in general decreased in the early 1980s. From 1982 to 1986, acts of school violence decreased from 4,315 to 2,801 incidents,

although they have increased considerably in recent years (*The Japan Times Online*, 2001; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 1999, 2000). Bullying in schools was recognized by scholars and others as a distinct category of problematic behaviors, which needed to be distinguished from other types of school violence. In 1994, the powerful Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (then called Monbushō and now known under the name of Monbukagakushyo) formed the Council for Research on Children and Students' Problematic Behaviors in order to cope with the problem of school bullying. The Council's public announcements about bullying, in turn, raised the schools' awareness of the problem and how to deal with it.

The Council introduced many suggestions about how to reduce school bullying in the context of family and community life, school functioning, collaboration between the police and the schools, and so on. The recommendations have stressed the importance of communication and a warm atmosphere in the family, more flexibility in helping victims of bullying to change classes and schools, greater openness of the schools vis-à-vis the surrounding community, improved counseling skills of teachers, and the importance of sickrooms in schools where the victims can open their hearts to others. Several of the suggestions are specifically intended to open otherwise tightly "sealed" classes, which tend to function as closed groups encouraging the more hidden forms of social manipulation. Nevertheless, school bullying continues to exist as a nationally recognized social problem. In addition, a growing number of anguished students refuse to go to school since they are unable or unwilling to survive in a pressured environment. Many of them display psychosomatic symptoms and a fear of being bullied while others are merely truant. Together, the twin problems of *Ijime* (bullying) and *Futoukou* (school refusal) suggest that Japan's bureaucratically-controlled educational system has lost some of its luster.

In 1996, an international symposium on school bullying was held by the Ministry of Education and Science and the National Institute for Educational Policy Research in Tokyo. Different scenarios of school bullying were discussed by scholars from Norway, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, and Japan. Until that time, many Japanese believed that school bullying—and especially group bullying—represented a specifically Japanese manifestation of classroom tensions. When Ogi (1997), for instance, emphasized that "There are serious problems of bullying in foreign countries," he usually received the following response: "But, it is not so devious or 'dark' as the Japanese cases, isn't it?"

Such an argument may have appeared plausible to many because they understood the concept of group bullying in terms of their somewhat stereotyped images of Japanese society. These were influenced by Japanese social science literature that has traditionally emphasized the collectivist

nature of Japanese society and the importance of striving for group harmony (e.g., Reischauer, 1988). Furthermore, a whole book industry labeled *Nihonjinron* ("Theory of the Japanese") has claimed that Japanese society and culture are unique and even characterized by a mysterious "essence" not to be found in other societies. In this context, group bullying of hapless victims in Japanese schools may be understood as the dark underside of a usually more benign emphasis on the individual's conformity to, and integration into, the group.

Given the collectivistic nature of Japanese society, groups often bully persons who deviate from explicit or implicit social standards and break the harmony of the group. For example, some Japanese newspapers have described several cruel and highly manipulative cases of group bullying in schools, in which the targets of the group were called "germs" and other members of classes were forbidden to interact with them. However, Japanese social scientists soon learned that Norwegian victims of school bullying have been referred to as "bacterias" in a quite similar way. Given such cross-cultural parallels, the 1996 conference succeeded in demonstrating that bullying is not unique to Japanese society, although the cultural aspects of school bullying need further analysis. Today, many Japanese teachers and scholars understand that school bullying is a widespread international phenomenon. In addition, as a direct consequence of the conference, various educational anti-bullying programs of other countries, such as Norway and Sweden, have been introduced in Japan (e.g., Morita, 1999).

This paper discusses research on school bullying from a cross-cultural point of view. It includes a discussion of the nature of Japanese classrooms, general definitions of bullying and of *Ijime*, reports on the frequency and nature of school bullying in Japan, and a selective review of some cross-cultural findings on school bullying, providing a broader perspective on Japanese discussions of the problem. The following brief discussion of Japanese classrooms is intended to supply some background information for the non-Japanese reader.

### JAPANESE CLASSROOMS

Japan's educational system is highly centralized and tightly controlled from the top, resembling in this respect the French rather than the American system. The Monbukagakushyo prescribes national curricula and recommends textbooks to be used. Compulsory education includes elementary schools (six grades) and lower secondary schools (three grades). Most of these schools are public schools established by municipalities. The public and private senior high schools include three grades and are voluntary in nature. Nevertheless, an astonishing 96%–97% of all junior high school students advance to the status of senior high school student. In addition, most high school students attend tutorial cramming schools (*juku*) in order

to prepare themselves for the very difficult entrance examinations to the better universities.

Altogether, Japan has been highly successful in upholding demanding educational standards. In addition, both parents and students know that in Japan's meritocratic system, school failure tends to destroy a student's chances to lead an economically successful life. Japan is truly a "school society" for its children, adolescents, and families.

Japanese schools place a major emphasis on group activities and the sharing of major responsibilities such as cleaning one's classroom and the school's hallways. Many of the students' activities are centered around their "homeroom"—the place where, according to Japanese studies, a major proportion of bullying activities take place, especially during class breaks. In comparison to other countries, such as England and Norway, fewer bullying incidents occur outside the school precincts, although a good many acts of *Ijime* also happen after school and on the students' way home.

One striking characteristic of Japanese schools concerns the extremely detailed list of rules and regulations that students are expected to follow (White, 1993). These typically include regulations for school uniforms, hairstyles, grooming, acceptable places in town for the students to visit, and even the precise routes that students must take on their way home. The numerous rules are designed by the authorities to increase school discipline and render the students more pliable, although the students may resent some of the more irksome demands made upon them. The purpose of schools is not so much to further the students' self-actualization and sense of individuality, but to help them function successfully in a demanding society within the context of group dynamics. Japanese students, in turn, often describe themselves as "ordinary" persons rather than as individuals having unusual personalities. Consequently, when incidents of bullying and *Ijime* occur, they frequently take place in a stifling atmosphere favoring the priority of group interests over individual interests.

Traditionally, both the social status and the general influence of Japanese teachers (*sensei*) in schools and vis-à-vis parents have been high, although in recent years there have been indications that more teachers find it difficult to control their classrooms. In addition, there have been government reports that rates of mental illness among teachers have been increasing since 1995 (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2001). Partially due to the implicit influence of Confucian norms, many teachers continue to comport themselves in a somewhat paternalistic manner and are frequently seen by their students as somewhat distant, though more or less respected, authority figures. Furthermore, some students report that their teachers employ corporal punishment as a means of discipline although this is against the law. This practice is bound to alienate some of the children and adolescents

even though many parents condone it at least in some educational situations. Moreover, because rapid social change has led to important attitudinal differences between generations, many teachers and other adults apparently find it difficult to fully understand the changing ways of their students. Seen in this context, opportunities for communication with teachers at a personal level are often limited in Japanese high schools.

Japanese students are placed under great pressure to achieve academically in an atmosphere that has been characterized as "examination hell." To gain acceptance to a leading university is extremely competitive, yet one's future career prospects depend to a large extent on such an achievement. Feeling pressured and tired, hedged in by numerous petty rules, lacking close contact with their teachers, and facing uncertain prospects for their future, a good many Japanese students suffer from feelings of unhappiness and even despair. For instance, in an international survey of general happiness with school life, only 26.3% of Japanese 10-year-olds reported feeling "very happy" placing them last among students from six countries (Nihon keizai shinbun, 1997). This and other findings suggest that many Japanese students feel frustrated about their experiences in school thereby making the schools potential breeding grounds for acts of *Ijime*. These may enable some troubled students to take out their unhappy feelings on peers to are serve as convenient scapegoats.

Attempts to deal with one's stresses and strains may also occur because Japan is a "school-society" where to be a "good child" tends to be equated with being a docile, well-mannered, responsive, and cooperative "good student." By necessity, however, many students will be unsuccessful in their educational strivings and consequently feel frustrated. Some of these students end up refusing to go to school, while others may be tempted to bully a peer. To understand these actions better, it should prove useful to discuss in some detail what kinds of bullying occur in Japanese schools and the best way to define and investigate such actions.

### DEFINITIONS OF BULLYING

A well-known definition of bullying by the pioneering Scandinavian researcher Olweus (1999) is as follows: "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (1999, p. 10). The actions may be direct or indirect and of a more physical or a more psychological nature. In addition, there should be real or perceived asymmetric power relationships between the bully and his or her victims. Thus, quarrels or fights among equals are excluded from this definition.

It should be noted that this standard definition of bullying is a behavioral one that emphasizes social context. However, seemingly similar acts of bullying may have quite different causes and underlying psychological processes, just as the same act of stealing does not necessarily depend on the same underlying psychological processes or causes in different cultural settings. For instance, a definition of bullying emphasizing physical rather than psychological violence would lead to misleading research results in the case of Japan. From a methodological point of view, it should prove useful to provide situational school scenarios to the respondents of interviews and questionnaires.

Many scholars around the world (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tos, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999) have accepted Olweus' definition, including several Japanese investigators reporting nationwide surveys (e.g., Morita, Soeda, Soeda, & Taki, 1999; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 1999, 2000). In this context, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (1999) defined bullying as repeated negative behavior that dehumanizes other(s) either physically or psychologically. However, several Japanese researchers have expressed some dissatisfaction in relation to Olweus' general framework (Ogi, 1997; Taki, 2001b). This dissatisfaction stems, in part, from sociocultural differences in the nature of school bullying and how participants and onlookers perceive and define it.

### DEFINING BULLYING FROM A JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE

The corresponding Japanese word for bullying is *ijime*. It is a term rather frequently used in everyday speech both for certain school situations and for other forms of "mobbing" in work situations or elsewhere. According to *Kojien*, one of the reliable Japanese dictionaries, the Japanese word, *ijimeru* (verb of *ijime*) is defined as "to treat a weak person(s) harshly." Other dictionaries translate the term as "to be cruel to, to tease, to annoy, to bully."

The prototype of *ijime* involves bullying in order to gain some sort of advantage over others who are handicapped and stigmatized in terms of their physical characteristics, social class background, meek personality, and so on. The prototype of *ijime*, especially when this word is applied to situations involving adults, may be as follows. If B bullies A in the way of C, this situation implies that a) the way of C is an insidious one though probably not against explicit rules or laws, b) A is in some way disadvantaged when compared to B. This "mental" prototype of *ijime* differs from the prototype of bullying in which a physically superior person hurts a weaker peer physically (Morita et al., 1999; Taki, 2001b).

It should be added that the term *Ijime* tends to have a feminine ring to many Japanese ears, pointing as it does to the more indirect styles of aggression. These include strategies designed to isolate a person socially, teasing the person in a destructive way, spreading rumors and slandering victims, whispering behind a person's back, introducing subtle innuendoes, ganging up on a person, and in general, the not so gentle arts of social manipulation and intimidation. In American psychology literature, such strategies are often referred to as relational rather than physical aggression. The term *Ijime* is also used for cases of hazing. However, the term would not be employed in cases where money is extorted as long as the main purpose of the extortion is financial in nature rather than trying to hurt the victim psychologically.

Furthermore, when the frequency of school violence incidents decreased in the beginning of the 1980s, the term *Ijime* came to be used as a label for a new and special type of violence in schools. This word was employed in a broad and vague way in those days, but, through discussions among teachers and scholars, it has been elaborated and more sharply defined in order to focus on a group of problematic behaviors distinguished from other types of school violence. As a result of this scholarly discussion, certain characteristics of *Ijime* have been disproportionately emphasized in Japanese literature on school bullying. For example, Japanese researchers have tended to focus on long-term bullying in same-age groups that can take on an especially insidious character.

We have discussed the concept of bullying as various researchers analyze it. However, students have their own conceptions of bullying or *Ijime*, which, in turn, will influence their behavior as well as their understanding of others' behavior in school. Furthermore, the students' conceptions include many ambiguities. In this regard, the Council for Research on Children and Students' Problematic Behaviors (1996b) reported that about 60% of students ranging from the second grade of primary school students to sophomore high school students indicated that they found it difficult to distinguish bullying from joking situations. Clearly, a gray zone exists ranging from jokes intended to be readily enjoyed by everybody, to jokes implicitly putting somebody down, to jokes intended to derogate a victim and to turn him or her into a target of future jokes and group contempt.

Ogi (1997) explored the concept of bullying held by 282 second-grade junior high school students in Tokyo. In this context, he presented thirty items that describe acts or situations in school and asked whether each act or situation constituted "bullying" or "not bullying but just joking." In response, only four behavioral items were identified as "bullying" by more than 75% of the respondents: Other class members have not spoken with him/her this week, even if he/she greeted them (91.1%); writing



"Drop dead," "Idiot" or "Get out" on a note to him/her (89.7%); shouting words such as "germ," "eczema," and so on at him/her (83.0%); stripping him/her of clothes or molesting him/her (75.9%). In contrast, only 5% of the students regarded "arguments that turned into a fistfight" as "bullying." These findings suggest that the students seem to share at least a few basic conceptions of bullying having to do with social isolation and derogation of a victim, but they also point to disagreements about such act items as "Going to the toilet with her/him even if I do not want to go," "Wearing his/her gym suit without permission," etc. These disagreements depend, in part, on the ambiguity of the described acts and situations. For example, the item "All students of a class sneer at him/her when the teacher appoints him/her" [to a classroom leadership position] was identified by only 36.2% as bullying, 38.7% concluded that it was not bullying, and 23% responded "don't know" to the item.

It is often unclear whether the students hold different concepts of bullying or whether there exists ambiguous or insufficient information about the situations presented. It is likely that at least in some research situations, the responding students needed additional information about the situation depicted, for example, how the protagonists felt about it. The fuzzy contours of the concept of *Ijime* make it difficult for social scientists to conduct reliable and valid research on the nature and frequency of bullying and mobbing in Japanese schools and to compare the results of their research with the results of studies conducted in other societies and cultures.

### FREQUENCY OF BULLYING

The Monbukagakushyo has administered surveys on school bullying to public primary, junior high, and senior high schools every year since 1985. Reports from these surveys indicate that school bullying has gradually decreased from 60,096 cases in 1995 to 31,359 cases in 1999.

However, these numbers are misleading since they are far lower than those reported in surveys of students. For instance, the Council for Research on Children and Students' Problematic Behaviors (1996a) administered a nationwide survey on school bullying among 2,048 primary school students, 4,694 junior high students, and 2,648 senior high school students. In addition, 557 teachers and 9,420 parents/guardians were asked to respond to a questionnaire on school bullying. According to the results, 22% of primary school students (fourth to sixth graders), 13% of junior high school students, and 4% of senior high school students indicated that they had been bullied during the school year (the survey was conducted in December and January and the school year begins in April). A second survey among 16,824 students indicated that 5.3% of primary school students

and 3.5% of junior high school students were bullied by someone at the time of the study (Management and Coordination Agency, 1998). These percentages may be compared to the results of a recent American study, which employed a representative sample of 6<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> graders. In the study, 29.9% of the students reported moderate or frequent involvement in bullying, either as a bully (13%), or as one who was bullied (10.6%), or both (6.3%) (Nansel et al., 2001).

Surveys of Japanese teachers and principals about the frequency of bullying incidents in schools are unreliable for a number of reasons. First of all, there is the aforementioned difficulty of defining the term bullying. Moreover, most Japanese students (especially those attending high schools) do not wish to report cases of bullying to their teachers. Furthermore, in the questionnaires used before 1994, the instruction "the acts of which the contents have been [clearly] identified" was included, but these words were omitted beginning in 1994 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 1999). In fact, 56,601 school bullying acts were reported in 1994, which is more than double the 21,598 cases reported in 1993. It is almost certain that the difference in reported cases between the two years does not reflect a dramatic increase in incidents, but mostly the different instructions of the Ministry.

In addition, there are problems of identifying bullying among similar acts occurring in schools. Yomiuri (1995), a newspaper publishing company, summarized the interview results of forty-seven chiefs of the Board of Education in Japan. Twenty-seven chiefs readily admitted that they found it difficult to distinguish school bullying from seemingly similar acts such as joking, mock teasing, chaffing, and so on.

In this context, Taki (1992) reviewed a number of school studies on bullying and determined that the frequencies outlined in those reports varied according to 1) the time period in which bullying occurred; 2) whether the respondents were instructed to report their subjective experiences of bullying others, witnessing bullying, or being targeted by the bullies themselves; 3) which negative behaviors were specified in the questionnaires. According to his results, Taki categorized cases of school violence as a) continuous group violence, b) one-on-one incidents occurring within one day, and c) other cases. Based on these distinctions, Taki conducted a four-year longitudinal study of junior high school students in a suburban area from 1985 to 1990. He found that long-term cases of group bullying (as reported either by the bullies or by the victims) did not decrease. In contrast, the other and more common forms of short-term and one-on-one violence decreased in the investigated period.

Concerning students' experiences as witnesses, he found that the frequency of long-term and many-against-one cases of violence observed by

the students did decrease from 1985 to 1990; however, the frequency of being exposed to this type of bullying as reported by the students did not decrease during that period. This and other evidence suggests that some of the more serious forms of bullying tend to go underground during the later school years while the more direct, impulsive, and short lived forms may be readily observed in the earlier school years.

#### FINDINGS OF A CROSS-CULTURAL SURVEY AND SOME ADDITIONAL DATA ON BULLYING

As mentioned above, cultural differences influence how researchers conceive of bullying, and which of its aspects they wish to investigate. Such differences make it more difficult to arrive at valid cross-cultural comparisons. Nevertheless, cross-cultural research on bullying has been helpful in assessing bullying in different countries from a broad range of perspectives. In addition, cross-cultural findings point to the importance of developing effective intervention programs. In this context, Morita (2001a, 2001b) conducted a large-scale comparative study on bullying in Japan (N = 6,906), Norway (N = 2,308), the Netherlands (N = 1,993), and England (N = 5,825). He asked students from primary, junior, and senior high schools about their experiences during the second school semester.

In the study, bullying was defined as 1) abusing or poking fun at somebody, 2) ignoring or shutting someone out from one's circle, 3) hitting, kicking or threatening, 4) starting a rumor in order to induce others to dislike the victim, 5) giving him/her a sheet of paper with offensive words written on it, 6) other similar acts (Olweus, 1999). It was also explained that joking is distinguishable from bullying by the response of the victim: while joking is readily appreciated together, bullying is not. Finally, it was stated that quarreling or struggling with somebody of equal power should not be considered bullying.

The findings revealed both common features and differences in regards to bullying among the students from the four countries. Here we will list some characteristics of school bullying in Japan from a comparative point of view.

1. *Types of Bullying*: Bullying was perceived in a consistent manner across the four countries. The most agreed-upon form was saying bad things about someone or teasing him/her. However, as Taki (2001b) suggested, seemingly similar acts in different countries may in reality have different meanings. For instance, "calling someone names" may be done

openly in the western countries but the names will be whispered behind the victim's back in Japan.

2. *Frequency of Bullying*: 13.9% of the Japanese students, 39.4% of the English students, 27% of the Dutch students, and 20.8% of the Norwegian students answered that they were bullied during the present semester (Morita, 2001b). While some of these cross-national differences may be due to different educational systems (Japanese schools follow a three-semester system and the western schools a two-semester system), most of the cross-national differences between Japan and the other countries are too large to be accounted for merely by the different semester system. Bullying, then, seems to be especially observable in England, but is less common in Japan.

3. *Frequency of Long-Term Bullying*: Among the bullied students, 17.7% (Japan), 12.4% (England), 11.7% (the Netherlands), and 17.1% (Norway) were bullied more than once per week during the semester (Morita, 2001b).

4. *Number of Bullying Students*: While most of the bullying was done by two to three students at a time, 5.2% of the bullied students in Japan, 1.3% in England, 2.2% in the Netherlands, and 1.3% in Norway were bullied by more than ten students during the semester (Hoshino, 2001). To reinforce the Japanese finding, The Council for Research on Children and Students' Problematic Behaviors (1996a) reported that about 20% of the bullied female junior high and senior high school students were bullied by more than ten students. Thus, bullying by large and often female groups of students is disproportionately common in Japanese schools.

5. *Relations between Bully and Victim*: In the case of Japanese students, 80% of the victims were bullied by students of the same school year, as was also the case in the Netherlands (Hoshino, 2001). In contrast, Olweus (1999) suggests that Norwegian students, especially those at younger ages, tend to be bullied by older students: More than 50% of the second or third graders in elementary school indicated that older students bullied them. Japanese school bullying, according to these and other data, occurs above all among classmates, suggesting that it is a phenomenon based on group dynamics among same-age peers.

6. *Responses to Bullying*: 61.6% (Japan), 67.1% (England), 3% (Norway), and 66.5% (the Netherlands) of the bullied students answered that they ignored bullying. In addition, 33.9% (Japan), 29.5% (England), 21.7% (the Netherlands), and 25% (Norway) of the bullied students did not report being bullied to anybody (Matsuura, 2001). Fifty-three percent of the bullied students in Japan did not want it to be known that they were bullied, and this was true especially in the case of parents/guardians (48%), siblings (31.6%), and friends (17.4%) (Matsuura, 2001). Thus, the Japanese students

were especially likely to hide that they were victims of bullying. This observation is in agreement with other research findings and tends to hold true especially for the older students.

Sixty percent of the Japanese parents/guardians of those primary or junior high school students who were bullied more than once during the school year indicated that their children were not bullied or that they did not know whether they were bullied. As for the teachers' awareness of the situation, 30% (primary schools), 40% (junior high schools), and 70% (senior high schools) of the teachers stated that there was no bullying even in those cases when students reported bullying in their classes (The Council for Research on Children and Students' Problematic Behaviors, 1996a). It appears that both the parents and the teachers in Japanese senior high schools are frequently oblivious to the bullying that goes on in the classrooms.

As in other societies, Japanese researchers of school bullying have identified a number of important sex differences. Whereas boys are more apt to engage in physical kinds of bullying, Japanese girls are more likely to perform psychological acts of *Ijime* against others. This is especially true for efforts to isolate a victim socially (Morita et al., 1999). Similar sex differences have also been obtained in North American and European studies.

Hoshino (2001) and his research associates reported that 64.2% of the bullied female students were bullied by female students, and 82% of the bullied male students were the victims of male students. These data suggest that bullying tends to be a within-the-same-sex phenomenon, with male students being especially unlikely to be bullied by female students.

The most common acts of *Ijime* (87% for both sexes) involved saying negative things about the victim and/or teasing him/her. Male victims were much more likely to be hit and kicked than female victims (54% vs. 20.9%). Group bullying was especially prevalent among the girls: 40.9% of the female victims were bullied by four to nine students, and 9.2% by ten or more students. In contrast, the corresponding percentages for male victims were 29.7% (4–9 bullies) and 4.5% (10 or more bullies).

Many of the aforementioned sex differences are consistent with the feminine, group-oriented prototype of *Ijime* with its emphasis on psychological manipulation and isolation. In addition, the findings suggest that further research on group dynamics in girls' groups and on "mean girls" would be fruitful, just as American researchers and the American public are now becoming more aware of the powerful negative impact of relational aggression among girls (Crick et al., 2001; Talbot, 2002).

The likelihood of *Ijime* occurring is also related to the students' age and the type of school they are attending. According to the national

“Monbushō Survey” of *Ijime* administered during 1994–1995, 21.9% of elementary school students reported they are currently victims or “were victims in the year but not now.” The corresponding percentages were 13.2% for lower-secondary school students and 3.9% for upper-secondary school students. These data show a rapid decline of *Ijime* incidents among the older students although it is also likely that they were less inclined than the younger students to report being the victims of bullying.

These research results point to the following characteristics of school bullying in Japanese schools: The frequency of bullying is relatively low in comparison to the other three countries, but the long-lasting forms of bullying and the bullying by many students are disproportionately common in Japan. Bullying is especially prevalent among younger students. Some boys are attracted to the more physical ways of bullying another person whereas groups of girls prefer to isolate the victim through nasty forms of social manipulation. Most of the school bullying episodes occur between same-age students who are part of the same class. It is clear that many of the victims keep quiet and refuse to admit their traumatic experiences to their parents, siblings, and friends. An element of secrecy surrounds many cases of bullying so that teachers and parents are frequently unaware how much some of their charges suffer. In fact, victims are often forced to act as if they were well integrated into their group when, in fact, they are subject to various acts of degradation and humiliation.

### SOME DETERMINANTS OF BULLYING IN JAPANESE CLASSROOMS

Several Japanese studies have shown that school bullies are oriented toward breaking school rules and committing deviant acts against other students (e.g., Benesse Educational Institute, 1996; The Council for Research on Children and Students’ Problematic Behaviors, 1996a). It appears that school bullies do not sufficiently internalize general social or cultural norms about not hurting others. When interviewed, many bullies state that they are “having fun” victimizing another classmate in an otherwise dull school environment while others merely go along with the group and feel uneasy and guilty about their behavior.

At the same time, bullying may depend on other factors: Even if the students recognize the social norms as those that should be followed, they may act against them in several ways. When a social norm, for instance, is described or interpreted in ambiguous or situational ways, they disregard it because of their own interpretation of the situation that deviates from that of most other students. Thus, they may perceive some bullying situations as ambiguous or harmless, because they are disguised as forms of joking, mild teasing, and so on. In this context, Morita and Kiyonaga (1994) argued

that although more than 90% of all students denied “teasing someone” or “hiding someone’s things,” there was nevertheless bullying in their classes in a context where many bullies tended to ignore the serious implications of their actions.

In addition, the researchers asserted that many of today’s students prefer to function in a “play mode.” This encourages them to engage in or accept bullying more easily, because they misinterpret acts of bullying as normal and acceptable forms of joking and kidding. Such misinterpretations may make their lives easier, less constrained, less dull, and more “fun” in the short run, but they may also serve to hide unconscious aggressive impulses. Furthermore, Morita and Kiyonaga point to the current tendency of many adolescents to avoid profound commitments to their groups and to think seriously (see also Naito, 1990). This trend especially encourages bystander and audience behavior together with a lack of concern for the victims’ suffering.

Several studies have suggested that bullying is more frequent in those classes that students perceive as having a poor moral atmosphere (e.g., The Council for Research on Children and Students’ Problematic Behaviors, 1996a). According to Hoshino’s (2001) investigation, the students in these classes state that many of their peers are not in tune with their classes, ignore others’ distress, demonstrate negative attitudes toward those students who are praised by teachers, do wrong things because it is fun, and so on. Hoshino’s research results suggest that 1) these classes do not accept or are not controlled by formal norms acceptable to the school authorities, 2) the students have little concern for each other, 3) the students conform to their somewhat deviant peer group, and 4) the students do not establish positive peer norms.

According to Morita and Kiyonaga (1994), classes with frequent bullying are made up of bullies, bullied students, an audience, and bystanders. In this context, “audience” refers to students who are amused by the bullying incidents and “bystanders” are those students who act as if they do not know the victims. According to the authors’ multivariate analysis, the victims display a tendency to “conform to power” and adopt a positive “orientation to central or formal school values.” In contrast, the bullies seek to gain “independence from school authorities’ power” and adopt a “negative attitude toward formal school values.” They argue that current Japanese school discipline supports students’ conformity to adult expectations without developing their independence.

It should be added that a general explanation of bullying in Japanese schools needs to take into account the collectivistic nature of Japanese society. According to Triandis, “collectivists either make no distinctions between personal and collective goals, or if they do make such distinctions, they subordinate their personal to the collective goals” (Triandis,

1995, p. 5). Assuming that this is true, school bullying in Japan can then be understood as an educational and group oriented problem occurring in a collectivistic society.

Several common characteristics of *Ijime* are consistent with such an interpretation. These include the many incidents of group bullying especially among female students, the "enmeshment" of many perpetrators and victims, the secrecy surrounding *Ijime*, the inability of many victims to withstand the psychological pressures created by their peers, and so on. When Tai (2001) analyzed Japanese data as part of the previously mentioned cross-cultural study on bullying, he found that bullying occurred more readily in those school classes where some forms of group competition and collective punishment had been introduced. In such a context, anybody seen as interfering with collective goals is in danger of being ostracized from the group.

The collectivistic nature of *Ijime* should not induce us to believe that bullying per se is more common in collectivistic societies than in individualistic societies, especially since this is not supported by cross-cultural data. Instead, by drawing a distinction between collectivistic and individualistic societies we can better understand the specific forms that bullying assumes in Japanese schools. *Ijime* appears to be most common in those schools and classes where teachers lack moral authority, students display a certain lack of collective justice, and the same students lack intrinsic commitment to their groups (Naito, 1990; Shimuzu, 1987). In such circumstances, many students act as noncommittal bystanders in bullying situations (Masataka, 1998). In contrast, when teachers do assume moral authority and are respected by their students, the students are also less likely to get involved in bullying activities. We may thus state that in a well integrated collectivistic society school bullying will rarely manifest itself, but that in a poorly integrated collectivistic society oriented toward collective punishment and relentless group competition, bullying will be common.

These considerations suggest that researchers need to pay more attention to the bystanders and the audience of bullying incidents. As an example, Masataka (1998) asked junior high school second and third graders (in schools where *Ijime* either occurred or did not occur) to respond to four hypothetical bullying situations. The percentage of students from bullying schools who selected playing the role of bystander as their own likely behavior was greater than the corresponding percentage in the other schools, although the percentage of students who said they would become bullies in the depicted situations differed little between the two groups. In addition, Masataka asked the students whether their mothers and their fathers would select the same behaviors that they did. The bystanders-to-be predicted more concordance with their mothers' behaviors but less with their



fathers' behaviors when compared to the other students. In addition, the bystanders tended to come from nuclear families in which their mothers were unemployed.

The latter findings should be seen in the context of changing Japanese family constellations (Naito & Gielen, 2005) together with the diminishing ability of schools and communities to socialize children and adolescents successfully. Many modern Japanese fathers are "psychologically absent" from their families, a tendency that reinforces exclusive mother-child bonds. In such a situation, some of the mothers indulge their children too much in their desire to ensure the child's happiness, but they may thereby also further egocentric and "mother-child centric" attitudes. These, in turn, may induce the child to engage in egocentric acts of bullying together with a concomitant lack of empathy for the victim. Many Japanese psychologists and psychiatrists believe that the commonly encountered emotional enmeshment of Japanese mothers and their children, together with poor guidance by weak fathers, produces a disproportionate number of children who are unable to function well in competitive school situations. While some of them refuse to go to school, others become participants, bystanders, or the audience to various acts of bullying while developing somewhat passive, yet irritable and conflictual, personalities.

However, a psychological analysis such as this should not induce us to overlook the failings of an over-organized educational system relying on hierarchically organized forms of regimentation, the creation of "examination wars," the suppression of individual strivings, and efforts to thwart the emergence of an autonomous self. *Ijime* is embedded in children's peer cultures that tend to reproduce some of the more autocratic, regimented, stressful, and punishing aspects of their school environment. No matter what family-induced psychological predispositions children bring to school, it is the school environment itself that typically triggers and supports acts of *Ijime* and *Futoukou*. This process is further facilitated by teachers' loss of moral authority in recent years. As they now operate in a more stressful environment, teachers are finding it more difficult to control their classes, to integrate them in a moral and prosocial level, and to serve as models of moral rectitude and integrity.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have reviewed some research on school bullying and *Ijime* in Japan from a cross-cultural perspective. We focused on definitional problems and suggested that the prototypical *Ijime* incident is different from that of bullying as understood in the more individualistic Western countries, although both terms cover the same behaviors at times. The typical case of

*Ijime* refers to behaviors that are intended to psychologically rather than physically harm weaker, same-age classmates in insidious ways.

The prototype of *Ijime* has influenced Japanese investigators of bullying to focus mostly on group structures and functions rather than on the students' morality. The authors of most *Ijime* studies share an underlying belief that bullying occurs mainly because of various group factors rather than because of the bully's moral incompetence or inherent aggressiveness.

In a related vein, Japanese researchers are less likely to investigate whether school bullies have a tendency to later commit crimes in their adulthood, because it is difficult for them to believe that bullies have, or are likely to develop, stable aggressive and immoral personalities. This holds true although numerous Western studies have shown that those boys systematically bullying others from elementary school on are far more likely to grow into later delinquents than their less-aggressive peers (Olweus, 1993). However, as members of a collectivistic society, both the Japanese researchers and the public tend to hold situational rather than dispositional views of human behavior (Masataka, 1998), and they therefore tend to conclude that bullying is predominantly caused by the effects of intricate group dynamics. In contrast, American and West European researchers come from more individualistic cultures, and they, therefore, tend to pay more attention to personality dispositions.

*Ijime* is a conspicuous and widely discussed phenomenon although Japanese schools are not generally violent places. At the same time, discussions of *Ijime* strike a special nerve among many Japanese commentators because they readily recognize it as a difficult-to-avoid and "dark" collectivistic phenomenon frequently shrouded in secrecy. It represents the unattractive underside of a group-oriented, pressured, conformity-demanding, highly regulated but also rapidly changing society. In contrast to the Japanese situation, in the United States the more general forms of school violence, including shootings and knifings, have been the focus of national debate, with discussions of bullying taking second place because it results in deaths and serious injuries only rarely. In international comparisons, Japanese rates of bullying and *Ijime* are on the low side. Nevertheless, a disproportionate number of *Ijime* cases involve insidious and frequently silent forms of group bullying, with girls at least as likely to practice the more psychologically oriented arts of social isolation as boys.

Many victims remain quiet about their difficult lives, and neither parents, teachers, nor school principals are likely to understand the full extent of bullying in schools. The victims may believe that bullying is their own responsibility and they should endure it, they should not "bother" others with their problems, their teachers are unable or unwilling to help them, and telling authority figures about the bullying situation may only lead to further bullying incidents rather than their disappearance. In other

words, some victims may fear acts of revenge by their classmates and so-called friends.

Because incidents of *Ijime* are frequently hidden, they are not easily controlled. In addition, the authority structures of Japanese schools tend to make it difficult to reduce *Ijime*; many teachers are not in tune with their students and it is uncertain whether introducing additional school rules and regulations will be all that successful in reducing the insidiousness of *Ijime*. It will be interesting to see whether current changes in the school curriculum, including a reduction of hours of instruction, the introduction of school counselors, and other measures will be successful in reducing incidents of *Ijime* and *Futoukou*.

Until recently, Western observers of Japanese schools and adolescents have presented us with predominantly positive descriptions of Japan's educational system and pointed to the excellent scores that Japanese students have achieved in international educational comparisons (e.g., LeTendre, 2002; Reischauer, 1988; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; White, 1987, 1993). White (1987), for instance, held up Japanese society as a model educational society profoundly committed to its children and to educational excellence. In contrast to these works, our more somber analysis points to some of the hidden psychological costs of the Japanese educational system which, however, have become more visible in recent years. *Ijime* and *Futoukou* have proven difficult-to-solve problems whose roots reach deeply into the foundations of Japan's national culture, educational institutions, family life, attitudinal differences between the generations, and changing social conditions.

If Japanese society is indeed committed to its children and adolescents as the harbingers of its future, it needs to look more closely at the structural reasons responsible for the present crisis of its educational institutions. While many Japanese educators, commentators, and the public have clearly recognized that the prevalence of *Ijime* and *Futoukou* points to some important flaws in its school system, it remains unclear whether the political will exists to reform it in a thorough manner.

#### NOTE

1. Some Japanese readers will probably be surprised about the preceding comments since they may believe that the Japanese educational system is undergoing a severe crisis. When making such a judgment, they implicitly or explicitly compare Japan's school conditions during the last decade to those prevailing in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, Japanese observers may be influenced by their perceptions of, and comparisons to, the educational systems of other East Asian and neo-Confucian societies such as China, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. However, when compared to schools in the United States and various European countries,

Japanese schools still function in a more efficient, less disorganized, and less violent way. It would, for instance, be difficult to find a single Japanese school that resembles one of the more dysfunctional inner-city schools in the United States.

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