International Circulation and Local Assemblage in Chile of Bullying as Epistemic Object

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Abstract
This article studies the emergence of bullying in Chile, considered as a cognitive, affective, and pragmatic configuration. It analyzes how it has been incorporated into public use in the country during the last two decades, becoming an object of legislation, regulation, and management, and converted into an object of government. The study is based on interviews with 16 strategic informants, 562 news, and more than 350 documents. After identifying milestones in the emergence of bullying as an epistemic object internationally, we describe its arrival and reconfiguration in the country. We propose that social scientists, international organizations, and mass media were crucial in the international transport and national assemblage of bullying. Its national configuration, made possible by four key groups of experts from the social sciences, occurred within the State’s networks and was operationalized through legislation and public intervention programs. A normative framing associated with human rights provided this object with a strong normative force. This research contributes to understanding how epistemic objects such as bullying become part of shared experiences of social reality.

Keywords
epistemic object, social science, school violence, governmentality, bullying

Introduction
During the last two decades, bullying has become a relevant social problem in Chile, the object of measurement, legislation, and intervention at different levels. The word bullying, so prevalent today, had no presence in Chilean news until 2001 (Valenzuela & Ramos Zincke, 2017). Neither did any social science study aim at measuring its prevalence as a form of school violence in the country. Only a few years later, a 2017 national survey reported that 61% of people aged between 15 and 29 years declared having been victims of “bullying” and 86% had witnessed episodes of “bullying” in their educational institutions (Instituto Nacional de la Juventud, 2017). For this generation, bullying has become part of daily life: something they can recognize and report.

Recent publications have explored the characteristics of bullying in Chile. Following Olweus, bullying is usually defined as “systematic aggressive behavior against a victim who cannot defend him or herself” (Gaete et al., 2017, p. 1). However, our understanding of it has become more complex. Distinctions are being made among bullying, cyberbullying, and homophobic bullying as different instances of the same object (Berger, 2010; Berger et al., 2019; Varela et al., 2014, 2019). A series of studies have reported evidence regarding the relevance of school climate and socioeconomic level as risk factors and about the detrimental consequences of bullying in personal wellbeing (Ayala et al., 2018; Hidalgo-Rasmussen et al., 2015; Varela et al., 2018, 2020, 2021). Advances are also being made in the study of the results of intervention strategies (Berger et al., 2019; Gaete et al., 2017; Hormazábal-Aguayo et al., 2019; Magendzo et al., 2013; Pérez et al., 2013; Varela, 2011, 2013).

While it has often been acknowledged that bullying has only recently been recognized as part of social reality in Chile (Magendzo & Donoso, 2000), little is known about the historical processes that have led to its emergence and stabilization during the last few decades (Valenzuela & Ramos Zincke, 2017). Some authors have attributed the sudden emergence of bullying to distinctive features of society and culture in Chile. According to Madriaza (2008, p. 113), the country’s vast economic inequality would be “one of the preferred contexts for the development of school violence.” In
Hopenhayn’s (2009) judgment, “the conditions and feelings of exclusion generate enormous frustration and aggressiveness and finally, violence” (p. 7). Alternatively, as Garcia and Madriaza (2006) put it, individualism and loss of symbols of collective identity nourish violence. However, these conditions were also present, and even more strongly, in the decades of 1980 and 1990, before bullying and school violence emerged as recognizable features of social reality, which could and should be managed.

Violence at schools is as old as these organizational entities. It has remained constant in the whole world, until recently, without being an object of public concern or attention (Brockliss, 2010; Shepard, 2010). In Chile, harassment, maltreatment, and corporal punishment were traditionally accepted. Not even the victims found justification to protest. The term “molestar” (upsetting, bothering) was often used to refer to these violent behaviors; however, it lacked normative connotations, framing them as little more than a nuisance (Magendzo & Donoso, 2000). Beatings or abuses by peers, considered to agree with the implicit rules in play at school, did not cross the threshold of unacceptability in this cultural context. They were assumed as “natural” and inevitable events; they could even be positively evaluated, as a way to temper character or, in the case of men, as an opportunity to display “manhood.” Students saw no violence in those acts nor an infringement of their rights; instead, they conceived them as unavoidable conditions they had to deal with. These violent events did not have the kind of configuration that we recognize in bullying today, as a kind of behavior that teachers, parents, authorities, and all of us agree to consider as unacceptable, condemnable, and reportable behavior.

Undoubtedly, in a short period of no more than 10 years, school violence underwent a significant transformation, replicating at a national scale what happened internationally (United Nations, 2006). Before, phenomena now classified as bullying and school violence were not identified in any collective and shared way. For all practical purposes, they did not exist in Chile. During the last few years, they have been constituted as cognitive and normative configurations, collectively recognized, and incorporated into public use, becoming a matter of legislation and institutional regulation. As components of a shared experience of social reality, they have become objects of attention and intervention by State institutions, courts of justice, schools, and families. This has completely altered the traditional sense of these forms of violence and led to new practices.

How has this happened? What led to this ontological and normative transformation? How did this reassembly of old experiential elements occur in Chile? How is the emergence of bullying in Chile connected with its international appearance? In this article, we seek to provide some answers to these questions. The general hypothesis that we sustain is that social science has played a fundamental and enacting role in that transformation of reality.

Analytical Perspectives: Epistemic Objects, Assemblages, and Circulation

Only recently has bullying emerged as a new reality and a widely recognized fact, both in scientific literature and public opinion. It corresponds to what Latour calls “hybrids,” which sociologists tend to conceive as exclusively social or discursive constructions. Our approach, instead, is to understand them as “assemblages” of heterogeneous and contingent elements. The notion of “assemblages,” as it has been developed by authors such as DeLanda (2006), Deleuze and Guattari (1988), and Latour (2005), corresponds to a way of rethinking ontology in a relational and processual way. Reality is made up of these dynamic arrangements. Assemblies or hybrid collectives include not only material components, but also human corporality and practices, concepts, and discursive elements (Latour, 2007). They involve connections, alignments, and some degree of stability, albeit provisional, but without a unifying core (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). In modern society, many hybrids, such as global warming, stress, frozen embryos, or pulsars, incorporate technoscientific elements. A large population of hybrids is generated within scientific spaces; however, they become recognized and used in everyday life. They acquire life outside the spaces of science.

The so-called “laboratory studies” serve as a reference for our approach, as they attend to the construction of scientific facts. Investigations on laboratories, such as those made by Latour and Woolgar (1986) and Knorr-Cetina (1981), which influenced the development of the Science and Technology Studies (STS) approach, transformed the way of conceiving scientific facts. This approach has departed from an understanding of objects or facts as pre-existing, well-defined, and self-contained entities. Instead, they conceive them as being enacted from outside, inescapably intertwined with networks of practices that sustain them, and with networks of human and nonhuman agents, including a multitude of technical devices.

Knorr-Cetina (2001) coined the concept “epistemic objects” to refer to the objects created by science. In contrast to ordinary objects such as chairs or hammers, these are characterized for being persistently incomplete, always under review, and possessing an “unfolding ontology” (p. 182): a reality that seems to be continually unfolding. They are also pluri-form: they exist in various ways, such as texts, graphics, computer codes, figures in databases, and pixels on computer screens. These objects result from assemblages of human and nonhuman elements: including bullying, they are assemblages of heterogeneous components. They lay at the center of an “assembly” of agents concerned about their constitution, maintenance, and use (Latour, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2005).

When we consider objects of the social sciences, the “stakeholders” of such assemblies are not only social scientists, but also different kinds of social actors with diverse interests. Furthermore, the object is shaped not only epistemically but
also normatively, affectively, and pragmatically. A wide variety of agents may become interested in these objects, as in the case of bullying: from this viewpoint, these agents may be conceived as their direct or indirect human spokespersons, that together with their different translations, actively participate in the assembly, ratifying or rejecting what is said about them. Each of these agents contributes to the configuration of the objects of the social sciences, according to the interest they have in them. Derivatively, the stability of these objects as part of what is regarded as social reality will constantly be exposed to tensions and alterations.

In these constructions, cognitive and normative components are intermingled. In terms of Latour, “matters of concern” overlap with “matters of fact.” This is part of the criticism that this author makes to what he has named the “modern constitution”: an ontological and epistemological approach that has historically enshrined the separation between facts and values, politics and society, nature and culture, and subject and object (Latour, 2004a, 2007). In this sense, epistemic objects are, at the same time, normative objects. They respond to normative orientations and preoccupations, and they operate normatively. Sustaining this, we depart from Knorr-Cetina (2001). Her concept aimed at giving sense to objects created by the natural sciences, such as enzymes and sub-atomic particles, where the normative dimension does not have the same salience as in the social sciences. However, we will continue to use the concept of “epistemic object” to underscore the cognitive dimension and the associated scientific work that are crucial and defining for these objects.

We must also attend to affectivity when it comes to objects that circulate outside of scientific spaces. Affectivity corresponds to an embodied connection, which goes beyond cognition and interpretation by affected individuals (Clough, 2010). Affectation or the capacity to be affected operates at a preconscious level in the interaction of human beings with the world. Between the body and its environment, there operates, as Massumi (2010, p. 66) puts it, an “affective twilight zone of indexical experience,” continuously activated by different elements. In the case of bullying, fears and anxieties are habitually triggered by mass media representations.

These epistemic or hybrid objects circulate widely. They travel both geographically and in a cognitive dimension: from the strictly scientific grounds to other fields, such as daily life, the public sphere, or the area of State institutions. However, such a journey is a complex undertaking that requires multiple operations and support elements, including: labeling, to facilitate object recognition while it is in circulation; packaging, to facilitate transport; sponsors and promoters, to support and encourage the journey; and a network of devices that enable their reassembly in the places of arrival (Howlett & Morgan, 2011; Morgan, 2011).

Although we say that objects travel or circulate, properly only specific means travel (methods, manuals, articles, researchers, data, etc.), which can enact new instances of the object or contribute to that end. The emergence of instances of epistemic objects throughout the world creates the impression that it is the object itself that travels or circulates. However, multiple translations and a broad array of reassembly processes are in action, mixing international and local elements, creating such impression.

On the other hand, the family of epistemic objects constituted by the social sciences exists inside the scientific realm but also “travel” to social institutions, shaping the realities of everyday life. That is the case of objects such as poverty, domestic violence, and bullying, which are usually associated with the State and are used to identify regulation and intervention targets. Thus, they allow governing the conduct of population aggregates. In such a way, they are components of modern “governmentality,” in the sense of Foucault (2006, 2007) (Ramos Zincke, 2012). We are interested in developing an understanding of the use of these objects of the social sciences from this macro perspective of society, which has not been the focus neither of Knorr-Cetina nor Latour’s approach.

Within this analytical framework, we can specify what we seek to find out about bullying. Our questions are: (1) How has this epistemic object of universal appearance been constituted or assembled in Chile, and what network generates and sustains it? What is the assembly in whose center of attention and concern it has taken form, at least initially? (2) How has this object managed to circulate throughout the world to reach Chile? What mediations have enabled or facilitated the trip? (3) How has bullying obtained the factual force that it has come to have? (4) What role have the social sciences played in this process?

**Methods**

The research design was based on the actor-network theory’s logic of following the actors, both human and non-human, that have been relevant to the construction of bullying as a recognizable and manageable scientific and social object in Chile. Following a sequential and emergence-driven purposeful sampling strategy during fieldwork (Patton, 2014), this involved identifying and interviewing people who have had a lasting effect in this process and reviewing a wide array of documents, including scientific articles, news, manuals, operational and legal documents, among others.

Following an iterative process, this led to the realization of 16 semi-structured interviews with strategic informants that have been involved in the networks that have produced bullying as an epistemic object, considering different points in the chain that allowed for its arrival and installation in Chile. Most of our informants are social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists) who either participated in early studies about bullying or school violence in the country or played a crucial role in governmental and non-governmental programs to intervene in this emerging reality. Each interview lasted between 45 and 100 minutes and...
involved informed consent. We asked each informant to facilitate access to documentation that could yield a concrete understanding of the material process of configuration of this epistemic object. As a result, we gathered more than 200 institutional documents and other publications from organizations involved in transport and production networks, and over 150 documents regarding the production process of school violence and bullying, including questionnaires, final reports, and presentations of the results of national surveys, and documents generated during the production process of these studies, including interim reports and working materials of the research teams.

To observe how this object took form in public opinion, we analyzed the usage of words derived from “bully” in El Mercurio from 2000 to 2013. This was the only influential newspaper in Chile whose digital collection covered this entire period. The digital collection of El Mercurio was accessed through the search engine (www.buscador.emol.com). To analyze the usage of terms derived from “bully,” we filtered this search engine using three terms: bullying, bulling, and *bully*. The asterisk allows to observe variations in these terms. Each news that included these terms was counted only once. We did not consider indexes, cover pages, or publicity of any kind. Neither did we consider results in which these terms were used as names (such as horses named “bully”) or titles (such as books of movies).

The configuration of bullying in Chile has radically transformed the perception and experience of violence in schools that teachers, students, parents, and school authorities have. Much evidence has been collected in this respect, based mainly on quantitative data (Berger et al., 2019; Hormazábal-Aguayo et al., 2019; Trajtenberg et al., 2021; Varela et al., 2021). However, this is not our matter here. In this article, we are concerned with the collective and institutional forces guiding the transformation process, in which the social sciences, legislation, State, and mass media are the main actors.

In what follows, we will first briefly review the international origins of this epistemic object. We will then analyze its arrival and reassembly in Chile. Indeed, each region presents different contexts for the emergence of bullying as an epistemic object. It is beyond the scope of this study to compare them. In including a brief account of the emergence of bullying in other regions, we have two objectives in mind. First, to present the broader international context in which local contexts acquire meaning. Second, pinpoint some key milestones that allow understanding the emergence of bullying as it occurred in Chile.

**Bullying in the World: Some Outstanding Milestones**

The first mentions of bullying, with the features that we attribute to this phenomenon today, occurred in Sweden and Norway around 1970. In the late 1960s, concern regarding school violence and its victims had emerged in Sweden. Peter-Paul Heinemann, a Swedish physician, and Dan Olweus, a Swedish psychologist resident in Norway, conducted research on the subject. Their results, published between 1969 and 1973, attracted considerable attention to the problem of school violence. The work of Dan Olweus in the early 1970s is considered the first major systematic research project on peer violence at school. His results were published in Sweden in 1973, in a book that appeared later translated and expanded in the USA, in 1978: *Aggression in the Schools. Bullies and Whipping Boys*.

Born in Sweden, Dan Olweus made his most significant work at the University of Bergen in Norway. His initial investigations were on Sweden and Norway, where they impacted public opinion, expanding concerns about school violence in Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and Norway). It became a focus of attention in the media and a matter of concern among teachers and parents of school children. In 1982, in Norway, cases of suicide committed by children between the ages of 10 and 14 years old, which were attributed to their harassment by peers, triggered a chain reaction that led the government to design and undertake, through the Ministry of Education, Prevention and Intervention Measures. Olweus (1993) was a leading participant in this process.

These early studies and public debates were quickly echoed in other European countries. In the late 1980s, several studies on violence were initiated in England, the most important of which focused on Sheffield’s area, using Olweus’ questionnaire (Whitney & Smith, 1993). In Ireland, research on the subject began in 1985, also adapting Olweus’ questionnaire. In the 1990s, numerous research and intervention experiences were carried out, first in Germany and The Netherlands, and later in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Concern about school violence crossed the ocean and spread prominently to Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United States of America (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Smith et al., 1999; UNICEF, 1999).

In 1998, the European Observatory of Violence in Schools, a research organization specialized in this subject, was created. It was the concrete outcome of a long-term study carried out since 1991 by several teams headed by Eric Debarbieux. One of the initiatives of this center was forming an international federation of researchers with expertise on violence in schools, and organizing several international meetings, beginning with a world conference on Violence in Schools and Public Policies, in 2001, in Paris. This and other organizational efforts contributed to placing the reality of school violence in the public sphere as a matter of concern that needed to be the subject of regulation. It also contributed to propagate ways of characterizing, approaching, and intervening in this reality.

In some countries, such as France, the problem took shape as part of the broader issue of youth violence. Therefore, the actions undertaken aimed beyond the limits of schools, leading to differences in the way of profiling the phenomenon of school violence (Debarbieux, 2006; Debarbieux et al., 2003).
The suicide of students, as in the case of Norway, and other extreme events of school violence, have generally triggered the public alarm, leading to institutional measures. In the USA, the 1999 student massacre at Columbine High School, which was early on linked to bullying problems, caused national concern. There being no legislation on this matter in the USA at the time, at the end of that same year, a first State established its ruling. Three years later, 15 States had already passed laws addressing bullying among students. In 2009, 49 States had included this phenomenon in their legislation (Olweus & Limber, 2010).

In all these countries, by the end of the 1990s, this topic had been firmly positioned in the public sphere, and a wide range of interventions that addressed school violence was already in place: legislation, school rules, curriculum interventions, mediation, and conflict intervention programs in schools, community intervention programs, teacher training in these matters, etc. (Jimerson et al., 2010; Smith, 2003; UNICEF, 1999). Besides, there were multiple measurements and procedures for obtaining information on school violence.

International organizations contributed to promoting value-based criteria and framings to raise awareness of the problem’s magnitude and spread procedures to deal with it. Thus, in 1989 the United Nations Convention of the Child’s Rights was quickly accepted throughout the world. Chile subscribed to it the following year. Additionally, several publications by these agencies spread concern about this problem (United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2002, 2006).

In the academic field, publications multiplied. In particular, two journals were created that congregated the most renowned researchers on the subject: in 2002, the *Journal of School Violence* and, in 2005, the *International Journal on Violence and School*.

The gradual emergence of bullying as an epistemic object can be seen in the figure below. It shows the presence of the term “bullying,” compared with “domestic violence,” as registered in several million books in English. The term “domestic violence” begins to increase in the late 1970s, while the usage of “bullying” increases since the 1990s (Figure 1).

**School Violence in Chile**

According to our press review, the entrance to Chile of this new cognitive and normative configuration, to which the labels of school violence and bullying were applied, occurred around 2000. Before that date, there was no significant presence of the terms bullying or school violence in the public sphere or the State’s institutional areas. Nor can it be recognized a concern to identify school violence as a collective and public problem. In other Latin American countries, the arrival of this epistemic object took place in the same period. We do not find their presence before the 1990s. Problematization of school violence takes place mainly in the 2000s, with some early manifestations in the 1990s (Avalos, 2003; Eljach, 2011; Rodriguez, 2007).

UNICEF was the earliest institution to express concerns on the matter in Chile. In 1994, it held the first nationwide survey on child abuse; however, it initially did not differentiate school violence as an analytical dimension, as it did several years later in the 2012 survey (UNICEF, 2012). The first national survey that addressed aggressive behavior and victimization among schoolchildren was the 2003 CONACE Survey on Drug Consumption, a nationwide study financed by the State. It included 10 questions on the issue, which would be repeated in 2005 (CONACE, 2003, 2005).

Between 1998 and 2004, four lines or programs of research took form, which would be fundamental to spread
the discussion on school violence, not only because of their results but also because of the trained professionals and the established networks. They were led by Abraham Magendzo, Ana María Aron, Luis Flores, and Fundación Paz Ciudadana. These investigations established links with research and intervention programs carried out internationally; researchers and graduate students who participated in them were later employed and well-positioned in relevant institutions, both public and private, spreading notions about school violence.

We have reconstructed these lines of investigation and their details, as well as the ministerial actions that we indicate later, based on the interviews carried out with the actors involved and the documents reviewed.

**Magendzo’s Team: From Discrimination to Intimidation**

A team led by Abraham Magendzo, Ph.D. in education (UCLA), located at the PIE, an independent academic center, researched discrimination in schools in 1996 to 1998, funded by FONDECYT (Chilean State funding program that supports, via public competition, the development of basic scientific research). It is, coincidentally, a period in which there was frequent news about fights in schools, vandalism, and the destruction of school infrastructure. Still, these events were not articulated into a concept that integrated and facilitated their recognition. Neither did this team initially have such concepts as school violence or bullying. However, their ethnographic research—done with anthropologist María Isabel Toledo’s participation—did recognize aggressive behaviors, like name-calling and isolation, as routes to discrimination. These researchers conceptualized them in terms of 'intimidation,' a phenomenon that would delve into what they called the “construction of the intimidated subject” (Magendzo & Donoso, 2000). On the other hand, the term “molestar” (bothering) was more frequent in school students’ language, which softens the phenomenon and makes it seem innocuous.

Between 1998 and 1999, members of this research team were awarded a Fulbright grant that allowed them to continue their bibliographic research on this topic at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. After some discussions with local researchers—particularly with professor Ervin Staub—, the Chileans noted that what they had called the “construction of the intimidated subject” involved the same type of social relations that the literature had been calling “bullying” since the 1970s. Afterward, this research team traveled to the University of Uppsala in Sweden to review the results of research and intervention programs accumulated on the subject and attain their work with this conceptualization.

Besides organizing diffusion activities that had broad appeal, this team published two books that would be widely consulted. The first, “When one is bothered ...” (Magendzo & Donoso, 2000), was still focused on discrimination. The second, *Intimidation among students. How to identify them and how to treat them* (Magendzo et al., 2004) was already focused on what has been internationally defined as bullying, which they insist on calling “intimidation,” a term that would not find adhesion in the country (Magendzo et al., 2004). These books contributed to the conceptual packaging of the phenomenon and the generation of intervention programs.

This team’s work was rooted in the human rights framework and received financial support from UNESCO, with whose normative perspective it was aligned.

**Aron’s Team: School Conviviality**

A second team, located at the School of Psychology of the Catholic University, and headed by Ana María Aron and Neva Milícic, funded by the public program FONDEF (Fund for Fomenting Scientific and Technological Development of the Chilean Government), carried out several projects in 1998, 2000, and 2004, to propose practices and procedures to improve the conviviality inside schools (“convivencia escolar”). School violence and abuse were not their initial focus. Being the opposite of a healthy school climate, they were considered as effects to be avoided instead of being the center of attention and conceptualization.

This group’s results were consistent with the objectives and perspectives the Ministry of Education had been operating with. In those years, especially since 1996, the Ministry of Education had included in the national school curriculum what it called Transversal Fundamental Objectives. These aimed at developing democratic values and practices in students and were raised in the context of the country’s return to democracy after the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. However, its practical implementation was not easy. The results were far from what could have been expected, remaining largely as pure rhetoric. Faced with this problem, the Catholic University team’s projects contributed to this line of educational work, proposing designs, and activities that could operationalize those objectives.

In the 2000s, when school violence emerged as a matter of public concern, this research line appeared like a fit response to this problem, although school violence was not its proper object. News about school violence contributed to stimulating the interest of teams working within the Ministry of Education, who found that this line of work on school climate provided precise intervention targets and proposals. The projects developed by Aron and her team offered solutions that, in this context, found their specific problem (Aron, 2000; Aron & Milícic, 2000). Since then, the ministry would develop joint attention to school climate (still conceptualized as *convivencia*) and violence.

**Fundación Paz Ciudadana: Delinquency Prevention**

Paz Ciudadana is a nonprofit institution founded in 1992, concerned with reducing crime. It seeks to provide knowledge (information, methodologies, and tools) useful for designing and evaluating public policies for citizen security.
Around 1998, the foundation accentuated its attention on youth violence, and in 2002 it began research on schools. In 2004, it undertook a Child Victimization Survey, including peer intimidation, which provided data on juvenile victimization in schools (Fundación Paz Ciudadana, 2004).

The president of this foundation was Agustín Edwards, owner of the country’s main newspaper chain. Political figures of diverse orientations participate in its directory. These characteristics helped to make Fundación Paz Ciudadana a highly recognized organization, with its investigations obtaining easy and broad access to the mass media. In 2005, the foundation began a preventive program, Paz Educa. This resulted from the foundation’s search for methodologies of intervention aimed at the prevention of school violence. It was based on programs developed in the United States of America and was advised by Jeffrey Prague, a member of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Violence at the University of Oregon (Mertz, 2006).

**Flores’ Team: The Meaning of Violence**

With different concerns, and without the well-defined practical orientation of the previous three research lines, in 2002, a fourth research team emerged, this time located at the Faculty of Education of the Catholic University of Chile. It was directed by Luis Flores, philosopher and PhD at the Catholic University of Leuven. Several violence facts demanded public attention in those years, such as violence in sports stadiums and vandalism in schools: events in which students destroyed furniture and facilities. According to statements made at the time by some authorities, such actions appeared as “nonsensical,” “without meaning.” Against this, and inspired by the works of François Dubet and René Girard, among others, Flores proposed precisely to find out that sense or meaning, supposedly absent, that motivates those actions, delving into the subjective dimension of violence. Flores developed his research in two projects, funded by FONDECYT, in 2001 and 2004. Among other team members, in these studies participated Mauricio García, dean of the School of Psychology at the University Alberto Hurtado, and Pablo Madriaza, then a young psychologist; afterwards, both would become relevant figures in the study of school violence.

In 2003, Flores and his team carried out an international cooperation project funded by an Ecos-Conicyt program regarding school violence. This project allowed for the participation of French specialist Debarbieux (1996, 2006), then director of the European Observatory of School Violence, who has published outstanding works on school violence. The study resulted from the foundation’s search for methodologies of intervention aimed at the prevention of school violence. It was based on programs developed in the United States of America and was advised by Jeffrey Prague, a member of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Violence at the University of Oregon (Mertz, 2006).

**Institutional Measurement of School Violence**

By the year 2005, the dissemination of the mentioned research results had positioned school violence as a matter of concern for State institutions. For authorities at the Ministry of Interior, this took shape as a problem of public safety. Its association with delinquency meant it required measurement and sanction mechanisms be put into place. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education considered it a problem regarding social relations in schools (*convivencia escolar*), which could be understood as related to the enforcement of human rights in school communities. As such, it required training and preventive measures to be adopted, in which the entire school community should participate.

As a result of the concern for school violence demonstrated by these two units of the State, in 2005, they both performed, in parallel, two separate surveys to measure it. One, the First National Survey on Violence in School, was undertaken by a team at Universidad Alberto Hurtado, responding to a request by the Ministry of Interior. A second survey conducted by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with UNESCO was formulated within the school conviviality (*convivencia escolar*) framework: the First National Study of School Conviviality, which also included questions regarding assault and abuse of students by peers and teachers.

In charge of the first survey focused on school violence, a team from Universidad Alberto Hurtado included Mauricio García and Pablo Madriaza, both being members of Luis Flores’ research team. Correspondingly, they based their survey on Debarbieux’s questionnaire, an instrument they had become familiar with in their previous research. The study was led by Franz Vanderschueren, PhD in sociology from the University of Paris. Vanderschueren was recognized as an international expert in public safety, an area in which he had made several consultancies for the Ministry of Interior in previous years, being a validated interlocutor for this organism. In this position, he was able to play the role of bridge or broker between the Division of Public Safety of the Ministry of Interior and the team of psychologists who worked in Flores’ research team.

Such duplication of the work of measurement by these two State agencies responded largely to both ministries’ interest in adopting this epistemic object and adapting it to their objectives and perspectives, thus competing against each other. Finally, the measurement of the Ministry of Interior prevailed. This branch of the government would conduct new surveys regarding violence in schools in 2007, 2009, and 2014, while the Ministry of Education did not conduct a second survey on the matter.

UNESCO, now operating separately, included questions about bullying in its Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study—a study encompassing 15 countries in Latin America, made in 2001. These questions were included as part of a dimension of “school climate,” which has
affinities with the notion of convivencia escolar adopted by the Ministry of Education. For its part, this ministry incorporated questions on school violence in the Simce, a massive national survey aimed at measuring school performance, which is applied to the country’s universe of educational establishments. In 2010, it included three indicators on the subject. Since 2011, it has incorporated 34 questions about aggression and bullying, together with questions about school life. This measurement has been used to evaluate comparatively the situation of schools.

The different national measurements, with probability samples allowing to infer their results to the total population of students, initiated by the Chilean State in 2005, were a significant milestone in stabilizing this epistemic object in everyday life and institutional spaces, still being called school violence or bullying interchangeably.

Propagation in Mass Media

Another outstanding landmark, very well remembered by all interviewees, and also mentioned in the parliamentary discussion to legislate on school violence, is the case of a girl, Pamela Pizarro, who, in 2006, after persistent harassment by her peers, committed suicide (El Mercurio, November 28, 2006). This event is an important milestone. For the first time, bullying was framed in the media as having concrete consequences of such intensity. It is a public hallmark in the configuration of bullying in this country: the phenomenon is clearly identified, and its potential consequences are simultaneously verified. This news, highlighted by the mass media, was a breakpoint in the recognition of the new configuration and provided a strong emotional component to the debate regarding bullying and its harmful effects, multiplying collective and institutional concerns about it.

This public attention and its manifestation in the media are illustrated in the following chart, which shows the frequency of news in El Mercurio that have used variations of the word “bullying” between 2000 and 2013, a period in which this epistemic object is consolidated. It is observed a takeoff in 2005 and strong growth since 2009 (Figure 2).

The diffusion of bullying as a new configuration of reality caused a carryover effect to other forms of violence, for example, within economic organizations, which also come to be labeled with this term. In the graph, the resulting increase in non-school bullying is observed since 2010.

Institutional Assemblage and Stabilization of the Epistemic Object

In the second half of the 2000s, numerous initiatives on school violence were undertaken by both State institutions and educational establishments. The explicit institutional ratification came, in 2011, with the passing of the Law on School Violence (Law No. 20536). Between the first and the last version of the law, a significant event took place, which exemplifies the complex intertwining of scientific and legislative operations: the organization of a seminar on school violence and school conviviality, with parliamentarians and researchers’ assistance. The researchers, coming from psychology, anthropology, and sociology, presented analysis and

Figure 2. Presence of variations of the word “bullying” in Chilean press (amount of news that employ it, 2000–2013).

Source. Newspaper El Mercurio, using Emol search engine.
results from investigations on school violence and commented on the current legislation as “experts.” Among those who attended were several authors of the investigations we have already mentioned, who had positioned the subject. It was also significant the participation of experts linked to UNESCO. A central part of the text that presents the relevance and justification of this law is based on scientific research and explanations given by experts.

The resulting law was meant to regulate how different actors included in the educational communities should react to acts typified as bullying. Since 2012, all schools are forced to create a school conviviality code (“reglamento de convivencia escolar”), which specifies how school violence (understood as bullying) is to be sanctioned. Committees must also be created for designing activities contributing to a healthy school climate. Finally, every member of the school community is obliged to report events of bullying. If these requirements of the law are not met, the school may be subjected to economic sanctions.

Bullying translated as school harassment (“acoso escolar”) was defined as “any act or omission constituting aggression or repeated harassment conducted inside or outside the educational establishment by students who, individually or collectively, attack another student, relying on their situation of superiority or the helplessness of the affected student, causing on the latter, abuse, humiliation or a well-founded fear of being exposed to danger, either by technological means or any other means, taking into account their age and condi-
tion” (Law 20,536, Article 16B).

This law has had a standardizing effect on the perception of the phenomenon of school violence. To the extent that this matter is subjected to possible sanctions for schools, it forces them to recognize, study, measure, diagnose, and mention it, in internal regulations and instructions, to teachers and students. That reiteration ratifies the reality of school violence, which becomes uniformed and reified, and finally turned into a widely shared object.

Since 2012, with the ruling of this law, concerns about bullying have mainly moved from the State and the public sphere to schools. Measurements and evaluations of the phenomenon are now left mainly in the hands of authorities and teachers of these educational institutions, who must respond, on the one hand, to the State and, on the other, to their direct audiences, students and parents, who have learned to identify it. Thus, for the government of these conducts, the State acts, in a decentralized way, through the schools, with their regulations, committees, and procedures for prevention and sanction. In fact, since 2012, schools have been actively mobilized to address bullying, enrolling teachers, students, and parents in the cause. The Ministry of Education (2011a, 2011b, 2013) has focused its intervention on supporting such internal action through guidelines, manuals, and training.

As a result, in less than 25 years, bullying has been incorporated into the country’s repertoire of known and recognizable social realities. It has become a cognitively identifiable reality, subject to a well-defined normative evaluation and regulation practices conducted by the State and educational establishments.

The notion of bullying developed in Chile subsumes experiences previously classified in schools and daily life as “matonaje,” intimidation, mistreatment, among other terms. These terms never achieved the articulation, delimitation, and normative force accompanying the new assemblage, with its scientific, legal, affective, and governmental constitution.

**Internal Tensions, Relative Stabilizations, and Shifting Boundaries**

Bullying is an hybrid object that has inherent instability. The social scientists involved in its assemblage expose this construction to continuous review. Besides, other participants in the assembly behind the object’s constitution can at any time activate demands and pressures that might alter it. We will refer to some of the most significant internal tensions of the resulting enactment of bullying regarding the different translations and associations involved.

The way of conceiving the phenomenon has had a drift, with changes in its content and delimitation. The term originally used in Sweden by Heineman since 1969 was mobbing, and it was focused on practices of group harassment. In the next version, originally and mainly developed by Olweus in 1970, the focus was expanded to various forms of intimidation and abuse in schools, beyond group aggression. However, violence remained restricted to interactions among students. Olweus’ definition was broadly accepted and echoed. According to this definition, to constitute bullying, a term that finally prevailed, aggressive behaviors require intentionality, maintenance in time, and imbalance or asymmetry of power (Olweus, 1993, 1996). This definition was also widely followed in Chile, as it would be reflected in the law of school violence, informally known as “ley del bullying.”

In this manner of demarcating the phenomenon, which has prevailed internationally, there is an implicit emphasis on establishing individual responsibilities and identifying bullies who harass or intimidate their peers. The problem is ascribed to individuals, based on a psychologizing approach (López et al., 2011). However, in Chile, this coexists with an institutional concern for “school conviviality,” being the Ministry of Education the main promoter of this orientation. It has been accompanied in this approach by institutions such as UNICEF, which does not consider children as aggressors. Both the Ministry of Education and UNICEF assign institutional responsibility to schools to facilitate or encourage the prevention of violence or promote trust, respect, and healthy relationships. Parliamentary discussions regarding the law of school violence began with a punitive orientation but also incorporated a strong emphasis on school climate promotion and the institutional responsibility of educational organizations in this (Carrasco et al., 2012; Library of Congress,
2011). However, a tension between punishment and prevention, between individual and sociocultural focus, although attenuated, persists. Thus, this is an incorporated tension in a continuous negotiation.

Meanwhile, the focus on peer violence has left out violence exerted by teachers, authorities, and establishment officials. The latter has been measured in the National Survey of Violence in Schools but has been scarcely treated. In its place, bullying, that is, violence among students, has been highlighted.

The violence suffered by school personnel harassed by students has been more radically excluded from what is conceptualized and treated as school violence. It is assumed that such people have the balance of power in their favor and, by definition, are not considered to be potential victims, despite frequent evidence of attacks against them. So far, no organization advocates on behalf of this personnel, pressing to include the aggression they suffer as part of school violence.

Along with aspects that are effectively measured but not considered later, other kinds of violent behaviors within schools are neither conceptualized nor measured. One such case is violence among peers that do not present an imbalance of power (Debarbieux, 1996). Such symmetrical fights between individuals or groups are noteworthy in Chile and linked to particular cultural codes and forms of recognition (García & Madriaza, 2006). Some of them are sporadic but eventually generate escalations of violence with greater impact.

Another form of violence at schools, which has gained visibility in the Chilean press in recent years, is what might be called anti-school or anti-systemic violence (Zerón, 2004). It is characterized by group violence against educational facilities, usually as part of collective action against educational policy and the use of market mechanisms for the educational system’s organization. Since 2011, in connection with the Chilean student movement’s actions, frequent and prolonged occupations of schools have occurred. The occupations alone are a manifestation of collective violence, but they are also frequently accompanied by widespread destruction of equipment and infrastructure.

The exclusion of the previously mentioned violent actions is derived from how school violence, as an epistemic object, has been constructed and from the relative power of the different components of the “constituent assembly,” using Latour’s concept.

Furthermore, such construction is associated with the possibilities of intervention on the object that participants conceive. Important social scientific discussions looking to profile school violence are conducted in State offices under official auspices and are subordinated to pragmatic considerations regarding what institutionally and politically is assessed as feasible and convenient. How this phenomenon is conceptualized and measured is restricted according to the kind of regulation of conduct that is possible to carry out. Broadly, the solutions that are available shape what can be diagnosed as a problem. Anti-systemic school violence, as a problem, does not fit the type of solutions that the Ministry of Education or the educational establishment can handle; consequently, it has been excluded. As it has been assembled in Chile, school violence is an epistemic object used by its constituent assembly to regulate conduct specifically by way of the Ministry of Education, other State agencies, and schools themselves. The emergence of anti-systemic violence as an epistemic object would require a different constituent assembly, including a set of actors that have not yet been incorporated, such as political parties, social movements, and the administrative State apparatus, among others.

Another phenomenon that could be included in school violence, but is in fact excluded, is what could be called institutional violence: the symbolic violence exercised by educational institutions on students, which is particularly evident in the case of cultural minorities. In this case, institutions may use their power to impose cognitive and axiological patterns on individuals who could be very distant from them. The reasons for the exclusion of this form of school violence are like those observed in the case of anti-systemic violence.

The exclusion of forms of violence such as the above mentioned—violence against teachers, anti-systemic violence, and institutional violence—does not result from theoretical discussions, although these are also part of the process. They result from pragmatic factors that operate through the “constituent assembly.” Therefore, in the future, their inclusion would depend on the presence of groups, movements, or other actors able to expose them as problems that require urgent solutions, on their capacity to mobilize and express themselves in the public sphere, and on the existence of installed capabilities to regulate or intervene them. It is the intertwining of interests, negotiating skills, and capacity for action, which leads to the particular delimitation that school violence acquires in specific times and places.

At any time, any associate of the constituent assembly of the object, or any other set of actors seeking to add themselves to it, may cause tensions and trigger renegotiations leading to reconfigurations. A group of parents may claim that the aggression exercised by teachers on students should be included in school violence; a political group may claim that the destruction of educational infrastructure by students should be included; sociologists located at universities may insist that some form of symbolic violence or symmetrical aggression of apparent short duration should be part of school violence. Eventually, new actors may enroll others, multiplying their strength and leading to a new reconfiguration of the object.

Conclusions

Today in Chile, bullying has become synonymous with school violence in daily parlance. As such, it is part of our everyday life and appears in the mass media as an objective social reality. It refers to a social reality that 20 years ago was not perceived with the empirical specifications, value-laden
connotations, clarity of borders, affective intensity, and sense of relevance that are now perceived in both the public and private spheres. It has been configured or assembled as a social reality. The measurements that began to be made in the 2000s and now are being regularized and standardized by the Chilean State apparatus and school authorities seem to fully account for phenomena existing previously to the measurements and interventions. That appearance, however, is the effect of practices of purification (Latour, 2007) that hide the gigantic work implied in the reconfiguration of meanings and values that has taken place in society, one in which social scientific investigations and measurements have been a constituent part. A new collective has been constituted, a “society with bullying,” that is, the result of a complex set of practices of translation that remain hidden beneath the surface of routinized and purified discourses. This production network, which we have here described, operates by altering interpretations, assessments, affections, and perceptions in a variety of actors, ranging from State authorities, journalists, social scientists, teachers, school system authorities, judicial officials to the ordinary citizens, who are exposed to the discourse that surrounds this object and to the practices associated with it.

Thus, it makes no sense to look for causes of the “deepening” of the phenomenon, attributing it to a culture of violence, or similar factors, as several Chilean researchers, previously mentioned, do. It is not so much that violence has increased in schools, but that the configuration of a specific epistemic object has taken place, with a new framing anchored in the population’s feelings. The instrumentation of this object for regulatory purposes has been quickly legitimized. Also, it has been increasingly recognized by the population.

**International Circulation**

The elements for enacting this epistemic object arrived in Chile from the northern countries, traveling through a combination of mediations, among which social science and international organizations, especially those of the United Nations, stand out; social science in the form of publications, measuring instruments, and experts who mobilize themselves from Chile to northern countries and vice versa, helped to transfer tools and procedures. A fundamental component of this object’s configuration is its normative packaging, to which United Nations organisms contribute decisively. The international declarations of social rights play a framing, legitimizing, and empowering role. Such is the case of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides a justificatory discourse centered on the protection against violence, with an institutional force that can promote policies and regulations. In the diffusion of such agreements and supporting research development, disseminating results, and preparing intervention, international UN agencies such as WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO, operate as mediators. They spread normative, evaluative, and intervening perspectives that Chilean institutions have well received.

Therefore, bullying is a cognitive and pragmatic configuration with a strong normative load, and this normativity is fundamental in articulating this object. It creates an impulse or motivation to act and turn bullying into an object of intervention. It is indeed a reality that is shaped up as part of collective, public attempts to regulate the conduct of population aggregates. In such a way, it is an object of government, part of the prevailing governmentality, in Foucault’s sense, which acquires its force as part of this process.

**National Assemblage**

This object was consolidated under the umbrella of the Chilean State. While it initially emerged outside the State’s networks, as the perceived threat of the behaviors involved in this form of violence became more vivid and widespread, the State assumed mounting responsibilities regarding its regulation and management. The State promptly took on the task of measuring it and quantitatively specifying its dimensions and national distribution, translating the phenomenon into indicators and data that State institutions could then monitor.

That translation led to a relative standardization of this form of violence, which facilitated its dissemination through public and private institutional instances, and throughout the country. In turn, the resulting data were displayed as information in the media and became repeated news about this reality, solidifying it. A new awareness toward everyday violence emerged; a new willingness or disposition to concede that the schools should be observed, surveilled, and monitored, and that results should be reported to State agencies and other institutional organisms.

Bullying’s configuration is characterized by the selectivity of components peculiar to the Chilean context. In defining bullying primarily as a problem between individuals—a psychological approach—the government effectively left aside structural and sociocultural dimensions of the phenomenon, excluding other forms of violence, such as violence against teachers, anti-systemic and politically motivated violence, and institutional violence. Only violence individually exerted by students against their peers, such as the old “matonaje,” are considered manifestations of this new form of school violence, with its governmental imprint. This particular selectivity may be considered the result of the pragmatic constraining of Chile’s governmentality framework. In the neoliberal process of transformation undergone by Chile since the 1970s, epistemic objects such as poverty and bullying have been converted into individualized realities, placing responsibilities at the individual level. That is the foundation for their institutional regulation. Further research is needed to further explore this hypothesis, which is related to the sociocultural norms regarding the term bullying and other forms of violence.
The bullying object takes shape, as we have shown, in an intertwining of heterogeneous elements that, as part of the assemblage, acquire particular forms of agency: instruments such as surveys, legal norms, normative declarations of international organizations, and stories in the mass media, among others; all them connected with the thousands of particular experiences lived by the students in their educational establishments which, as part of this vast network, get their meaning reconfigured.

In this process, bullying has been configured or assembled as a social reality that is the subject of government. Its cognitive constitution itself is used instrumentally to regulate the behavior of the population. It is, thus, an ontological process associated with government and social regulation. Bullying has become an object of government, and its appearance has had a tremendous effect on the individuals’ behavior, an effect that has been maintained and accentuated over time.

To the extent that epistemic objects become objects of government, their construction tends to close; they become uniform and standardized. It is not easy to reopen them. The assembly freezes its functioning. In fact, this is the situation of bullying now in Chile. Governmentalization stabilizes the epistemic object, just as scientific research is usually an opening factor. However, it will be, above all, the arrival of new stakeholders or the emergence of new concerns from the old stakeholders, which will be able to unfreeze the object and put it in motion again. In this matter, although the Foucauldian approach and the actor-network theory differ, we believe that they can be made to talk: a dialogue between governmentality and cosmopolitics, in the line presented here.

The constitution of bullying as a stable epistemic object blurs the frontiers between science and politics that are so often taken for granted, illuminating the agency of hybrids that trace heterogeneous networks. In the process of enacting bullying in Chile, social science researchers have played a key role. They specified the object’s profile, transported international configurations, and connected, through their empirical research, public and institutional concerns with the experiences of individuals. Their role as carriers and translators was crucial. In the negotiations among the different stakeholders of this object’s constituent assembly, they were an obligatory passage point in the discussion about problematization, conceptualization, measurement, operationalization, and intervention.

Mass media played an outstanding role in the national propagation of this reconfigured phenomenon. Measurement results, State actions, and everyday experiences included in this object have been shown in these media, which act as the backdrop against which shared social reality is projected and recognized as such (Luhmann, 2000). Also, they add emotional ingredients to the assembling of the object. Television, in particular, with its multimodal character, generates representations with great emotional force, generating feelings of fear and rejection. Thus, an important component of this reality is the “indexically” reconfigured affectivity, as Massumi (2010) says. While violence against women had behind it an extensive social movement and organized pressure groups, bullying has had mainly the connecting support of television. In the case of bullying in Chile, television has served to connect scattered and manifold concerns of school children’s parents, congregating a sort of virtual movement. However, the mass media alone would not have been able to shape these complex articulations; they operate more properly as triggers, showing extreme events with strong emotional charge, and then as reinforcers, informing on the activities and results of public and private institutions that measure, diagnose, and treat these phenomena.

Thus, in the constituent assembly of bullying, the main participants are researchers from the social sciences, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the Parliament, and the mass media. Through them, various concerns are expressed about discrimination, the safety of children, the school climate of the establishments, and crime, among others. Such participating actors operate, in turn, as spokespersons for other actors, translating their concerns. The mass media do it manifestly, incorporating the voices of parents concerned about their children. The Parliament, concerned about the population as a whole, captures its reality mainly through the voice of researchers who are supposed to be able to apprehend it. In any case, it should be noted that every assembly is restricted, and leaves actors and concerns excluded.

The international circulation of discourse about this epistemic object, particularly in scientific publications, together with the standardized tools and practices that facilitate its repeated assemblage throughout the world, create a semblance of universality. The object is perceived as a global reality, common to countries as diverse as Norway, England, Japan, and Chile. The varied operations that we have shown allow the emergence of similar features, a certain uniformity, and the same label. However, under the guise of universality, there are hidden differences reflected in tensions and exclusions as those we have indicated. These are resolved in different ways in each country, according to particular negotiations, enrollments, and translations occurring in the respective constituent assemblies of the object. Furthermore, the results of such negotiations and translations will change over time.

On the theoretical side, the case study gives a broader perspective regarding the notion of epistemic object. Knorr-Cetina’s concept requires being complemented by considering different non-epistemic (or non-research-oriented) processes when applied to objects of the social sciences. These objects usually drift outside the scientific borders, where various “stakeholders” are interested in shaping them and, especially, in using them as part of governmentality processes, with the mixture of knowledge and power that Foucault highlights. The resulting hybrid object is, at the same time, epistemic, normative, affective, and pragmatic. Science remains as its cognitive
component, but the object is much more complex than that. Also, in its assembly, under such social demands, there are continuous pressures to close the object, black-boxing it, against the scientific tendency to revise it continuously.

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