Bullying in Schools: Lessons From Two Decades of Research

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Bullying is described as aggressive behavior normally characterized by repetition and imbalance of power. It may be considered as a normative in many group settings, but socially unacceptable within the ethos of a democratic society. The history of research and intervention on bullying in schools during the past two decades is summarized. School bullying emerges as an international issue, and we have increasing knowledge of its nature and effects. There is also growing experience of the effectiveness of a range of school-based intervention strategies. These issues are discussed in relation to the 10 articles from 9 countries that constitute the remainder of this Special Issue on Bullying in Schools. Aggr. Behav. 26:1–9, 2000.   © 2000 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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"It is a fundamental democratic right for a child to feel safe in school and to be spared the oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation implied in bullying." [Olweus, 1999, p 21]

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is usually defined [e.g., Olweus, 1999, Figure 1.1] as a subset of aggressive behavior characterized by repetition and an imbalance of power. The definition "a systematic abuse of power" [Smith and Sharp, 1994, p 2] also captures these two features. The behavior involved is generally thought of as being repetitive, i.e., a victim is targeted a number of times. Also, the victim cannot defend himself or herself easily, for one or more reasons: He or she may be outnumbered, smaller or less physically strong, or less psychologically resilient than the person(s) doing the bullying.

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Although these two criteria (repetition and power imbalance) are not universally accepted, they are now widely used. Indeed, bullying by its nature is likely to have particular characteristics (such as fear of telling by the victim) and particular outcomes (such as development of low self-esteem and depression in the victim). The relative defenselessness of the victim also implies an obligation on others to intervene, if we take the democratic rights of the victim seriously.

The Olweus quotation above is a plea for victims' rights, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [United Nations, 1991] considers protection from abuse to be an important prerequisite for the quality of life that children have a right to expect. The past two decades have seen progress in this respect, but dealing with bullying effectively is not going to be easy. Power relationships are ubiquitous in human groups. A position of power can be (and very often is) managed nonabusively, but there are often likely to be advantages to someone in exploiting power. The temptation to do so repeatedly to the distress of a less powerful victim will not be rare. We can therefore think of bully-victim relationships as normative, in the strictly limited sense that they are likely to be found in any relatively enduring human group that it is difficult for someone to leave if they are experiencing victimization.

In fact, prevailing evidence suggests that bully-victim relationships are normative. This has been found most convincingly in schools, where the term "bullying" first gathered its particular modern connotations (as in the novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays*). A recent edited volume [Smith et al., 1999] demonstrated its existence (in remarkably similar structural forms) in 16 European countries, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as providing indications of similar phenomena in the developing world. Research to date suggests we can accept as a reasonable generalization that *any* school can anticipate bullying occurring, although with varying degrees of severity. Indeed, Schuster [1999] found evidence in German schools that *almost all classes* had an identifiable victim, although this finding still needs wider confirmation. Emerging national consciousness of the prevalence of school bullying both enables schools to admit to the problem without being judged a bad school and prompts parents, schools, education authorities and sometimes governments to take active steps to reduce its occurrences.

It is recognized that bullying in its generic sense can happen in many other settings in adult life, such as the workplace, prisons, old people's homes, and family homes [e.g., special issue of *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, vol 7 No. 3, 1997]. In the family home, the term "abuse" seems to be used more than bullying, especially in relation to parent-child relations, but there is a large literature on the topic [Malinowsky-Rummell and Hansen, 1993; Spaccerelli, 1994]. It is also clear that family relationships can be linked to the child's later involvement as bully or victim in school [Smith and Myron-Wilson, 1998]. The topic of workplace bullying has begun to be studied thoroughly in the past decade [special issue of *Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology* vol 5 No. 2, 1996; Rayner and Höel, 1997] and has some overlap with the methodology and literature in school bullying [Schuster, 1998]. Bullying in prisons, too, has begun to be studied systematically [Ireland, 1999].

In all these settings, it may turn out that bully-victim relationships are also normative in the sense that they can be routinely expected to occur. However, normative in this sense does not mean they are socially acceptable. Again (as with the issue of definition), there is not universal agreement on this latter judgment. There is a view that

bullying is character forming and a necessary part of growing up. A senior United Kingdom politician was recently quoted as saying that school bullying had done him no harm and was a preparation for life [The Guardian, 1996]. Attitudinal surveys regularly show a significant minority of respondents who have pro-bullying attitudes [Rigby, 1997]. However, the evidence on the harm done to victims [e.g., Andreou, this issue; Hawker and Boulton, in press; Olafsen and Viemerö, this issue; Rigby, 1999] and the fact that victims are generally unable to defend themselves effectively means that most people view bullying as at least an unfair activity. They often regard it as pernicious and highly damaging in its effects and needing to be vigorously countered. There is ample evidence that many forms of victimization can have profound effects on the mental (e.g., the link with depression) and physical (e.g., the link with depressed disease resistance) health in their targets [Brain, 1997]. Sometimes victims take their own lives as a consequence of continued bullying. O'Moore [this issue] vividly documents one such occurrence and the moral implications for those working in schools.

The struggle to reduce the incidence of bullying and its harmful consequences (for the victims but also for the bullies themselves and the bystanders) has been a humanitarian objective that has driven much of the research of the past two decades. This Special Issue, focusing on Bullying in Schools, is a contribution to this process. This historically recent research effort on bullying and the public response and concern about it seem characteristic of countries without more immediate problems such as malnutrition and civil war [Ohsako, 1999]. Indeed, concern about bullying and victimization in personal relationships seems to be part of a broader increase in consciousness of rights (e.g., for women, for people with different sexual orientation, for people of different ethnic or religious groupings, or for people with disabilities). These have, at varying speeds and varying effectiveness, characterized democratic countries in the twentieth century.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON SCHOOL BULLYING

In the case of school bullying, a significant start was made in the Scandinavian countries, with the landmark publication of Olweus' [1978] book on *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*. Work continued in Norway and Sweden, and in the 1980s there was the first example of a national intervention campaign against bullying. This and related works are described by Olweus [1993] and the most recent developments in this continuing program are described by Roland [this issue]. The success of this Norwegian work undoubtedly influenced and inspired the subsequent research and intervention activities in other European countries. In Europe, a meeting hosted in Stavanger, Norway, in 1987 acted as a prompt to other researchers and practitioners. Finland, the United Kingdom, and Ireland, in particular, started developing programs of work.

A rather separate tradition of research was developed in Japan. A specific Japanese word, *ijime*, corresponds closely (although not exactly) to the English word *bullying*. During the 1980s, there were surveys on the nature and frequency of ijime, which was believed to be a specifically Japanese problem. Rather prematurely, some findings (based on teachers' reports) suggested a decrease in the problem, and research activity and public concern correspondingly declined for a period. However, a succession of suicides caused by school bullying from 1993 to 1995 led to a second phase of activity [Morita et al., 1999a] that currently continues. During this second phase, there has been

much interchange between Japanese and western researchers, with joint research activities and publications (Morita et al., 1999b; Smith et al., 1999).

In Finland, the research group headed by Lagerspetz had been working in the area for some time [Lagerspetz et al., 1982]. This has developed notably in the work of Björkqvist et al. [1992] and his colleagues on indirect as well as direct aggression. Indirect aggression is more evident in females, and this applies also to bullying [Rivers and Smith, 1994]. This raises important issues for understanding gender differences in bullying and in tackling it because indirect aggression (such as rumor-mongering and social exclusion) is more difficult to pin down and to discourage [Owens et al., this issue, also discusses these issues from an Australian perspective]. Salmivalli made another important advance in defining different participant roles in bully-victim relationships. Salmivalli describes ringleader bullies (who take the initiative), follower bullies (who then join in), reinforcers (who encourage the bully or laugh at the victim), defenders (who help the victim), and bystanders (who stay out of things), as well as the victims themselves (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Previously, writers such as Pikas [1989], in Sweden, had also distinguished between provocative victims (who partly cause the bullying) and classic victims (who are picked on without provocation). These distinctions help us look in more detail at the dynamics of bullying and the characteristics of those involved.

In the United Kingdom there have been partially separate developments in England, Scotland, and Wales. In England, Smith and his colleagues carried out surveys on bullying [Whitney and Smith, 1993] and reported on an intervention campaign in schools modeled in part on the first Norwegian campaign but paying more attention to process variables in the intervention [Smith and Sharp, 1994]. This led to a pack, *Don't Suffer in Silence* [1994], being made available to schools nationally by the Department for Education, London. In Scotland, Mellor [1990] carried out a survey, and the Scottish Council (Edinburgh) published two packs: *Action Against Bullying* [1991] and *Supporting Schools Against Bullying* [1993]. In Wales, Tattum produced several books and videos [e.g., Tattum et al., 1993] and set up an Anti-Bullying Unit in Cardiff.

In Ireland, too, there have been surveys and research [Byrne, 1999], and national guidelines were produced in 1993 by the Ministry of Education in Dublin for countering bullying behavior in schools. An Anti-Bullying Centre has been set up at Trinity College, Dublin [see also O'Moore, this issue].

During the last few years, school bullying has been taken up as a research and policy issue in many other European countries, including Germany [Lösel and Bliesener, 1999; Schäfer and Frey, 1998], the Netherlands [Limper, this issue], Belgium [Vettenburg, 1999], Italy [Fonzi, 1997], Spain [Ruiz and Lera, this issue], Portugal [Almeida, 1999], France [Pain et al., 1997], and Switzerland [Alsaker and Brunner, 1999].

In North America there has been a long tradition of research on aggressive behavior in childhood. This has intersected with the European tradition to produce a body of research on victimization, influenced by the research strands on sociometric status and social skills in childhood [e.g., Crick and Dodge, 1994; Dodge, 1986]. Crick, and others, have pursued the issue of relational aggression and its effects [e.g., Crick and Grotpeter, 1995]. Kochenderfer and Ladd [1997] have reported a longitudinal study of victimization in young children, and Hodges et al. [1997] on risk factors in becoming a victim. More research directly on bully-victim relationships has come from the work of Pepler and colleagues in Canada [e.g., Pepler et al., 1998]. Ross [1996] reviews the North American as well as European research on bullying and on teasing.

In Australia and New Zealand there have also been several initiatives, including the P.E.A.C.E pack in Australia [Slee, 1996] and the Kia Kaha program and others in New Zealand [Sullivan, 1999]. Rigby [1996] gives a broad overview of bullying research internationally while featuring much of the Australian work of himself and his colleagues.

OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In this special issue of *Aggressive Behavior*, Section A reports recent findings, primarily on characteristics of children involved in bully-victim relationships. Vermande et al. (this issue) examine different models of the structural characteristics of such relationships in 84 school classes in the Netherlands. Their results suggest a "combined central victim/aggressor" model in which minorities of children are victims or aggressors only. Their innovative methodological approach helps us understand more of the somewhat neglected topic of relationship networks in this area (although see also Salmivalli et al., 1997; Schuster, in press). Of course, structural models may change with age. Vermande et al. (this issue) report work on 5- and 6-year-olds, an age at which definite bully-victim relationships are only beginning to emerge. The nature and frequency of such relationships show distinct changes over the school years into adolescence [Ortega Ruiz and Lera, this issue; Smith et al., in press].

A new approach to understanding the thoughts and attributions of bullies and victims is evident in the work of Smorti and Ciucci in Italy [this issue]. They take a novel, narrative approach to try and match an experimental testing paradigm with putting bullying in context. Their results suggest that victims feel a lack of control and fear the power of others' actions, whereas bullies feel more in control and make more use of mental states than their victims. This latter finding is of interest as it suggests that bullies in some cases (at least in ringleader bullies) have good theory of mind skills [Sutton et al., 1999] and high social intelligence [Kaukiainen et al., 1999]. This is in contrast to the view that bullies lack social skills [Crick and Dodge, 1999].

Such findings suggest that some bullies use social skills for personal gain but antisocial ends. This is reinforced by the findings of Andreou [this issue] of high Machiavellian scores in bullies and bully/victims in Greece. The victim's perception of an external locus of control [compare Smorti and Ciucci] combined with their generally low self-esteem strongly suggest the likely consequences of bullying. In this study (although not in all reports), these characteristics tend to be true of bullies too. O'Moore [this issue] also reports on low self-esteem in victims, bully/victims, *and* bullies in Ireland. The findings on self-esteem are most consistent across studies for victims but less so for bullies [Boulton and Smith, 1994; Hawker and Boulton, in press] and depend on the particular aspects of self-esteem being assessed [Andreou, this issue; O'Moore, this issue]. There are also consistent findings of associations between victimization and depression [Hawker and Boulton, in press].

Coping strategies of victims vary considerably and have differing degrees of success [e.g., Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1997]. Olafsen and Viemerö [this issue] examine this further in a Finnish sample from the Swedish-speaking island of Åland. Like Andreou [this issue] and O'Moore]this issue], Olafsen and Viemerö distinguish the category of bully/victims from both bullies and victims, and they often do have distinct characteristics. Also, bully/victims or aggressive victims may have the most adverse family backgrounds (Schwartz et al., 1997). Gender differences in coping strategies are also discussed in this article [as in Cowie this issue].

Most research on the characteristics of bullying has followed the dominant quantitative paradigm in psychology. However, qualitative research strategies may have much to offer in terms of insight into the kinds of bullying experienced and the understandings of these behaviors in the peer group. Owens et al. [this issue] use such an approach in two Australian schools. They use focus groups, supplemented by pair and individual interviews, to get further insights, discussing carefully the rigor of this approach. They focus particularly on the indirect forms of bullying (talking about others and exclusionary tactics) that adolescent girls especially use and reflect on the difficulties of working on these forms of behavior in a school setting by conventional (e.g., curriculum and school policy) initiatives. They suggest that peer mediation might have some promise. Contrasting views of pupils and teachers are also given due weight in this analysis.

All these articles produce findings with some implications for intervention work, but this latter topic is tackled more centrally in the articles in Section B of the Special Issue. Cowie [this issue] focuses much of her article on the issue of peer support, which can include befriending, conflict resolution, and counseling-based schemes. Her review of these approaches in schools in England suggests they have promise, but the costs of their implementation have to be considered. There are also particular difficulties in maintaining a gender balance in peer supporters, since in mixed-sex schools especially boys training in peer support can themselves be at risk of negative comments from other pupils. This threat to "masculinity" of taking a caring attitude to victims may also be evident in her finding that boy victims (to a greater extent than even girl victims) are unwilling to tell others of their distress.

O'Moore [this issue] discusses a range of intervention approaches open to schools, including whole school policy approaches and nonpunitive sanctions for bullies such as the *No Blame* and *Pikas* methods, as well as peer support. She particularly points out the need for training for teachers, at both the preservice and inservice levels, if such measures are to be implemented effectively.

Ortega Ruiz and Lera [this issue], following a review of their survey findings on bullying in Andalucia (southern Spain), then describe the SAVE (*Sevilla Anti-Violencia Escolar*) project. This approach is an eclectic one, providing teachers with a set of "tool bags" for various situations (including details on cooperative group work, peer mediation, and the *Pikas* method). It takes an ecological perspective, aiming at working on the quality of interpersonal relationships in the school, or school "climate" or "ethos," as well as the curriculum initiatives. This initiative in Seville's schools is now moving more generally into corresponding work in the region of Andalucia. The near future should see evaluations of the effectiveness of these promising programs.

Limper [this issue] points to the importance of cooperation between parents, teachers, and school boards in tackling bullying. This is a particular issue in the Netherlands, in which there are four different parents' organizations. He describes the development of early survey work, then the initiative taken by the parent's organizations, leading to a National Education Protocol against bullying. This again is quite eclectic in its components but includes a five-track approach (for victims, bullies, bystanders, teachers, and parents) and class rules. A special development is the Pest Test, based on the Olweus questionnaire but used here to diagnose children particularly involved in bullying. This test might also be used for evaluation of the work done; so far, the evaluation of the success of the campaign has been based on level of activity and raised levels of personal, institutional, and national awareness.

The Olweus self-report questionnaire was used in pre- and posttest evaluations of the first Norwegian intervention campaign against bullying, in 1983. As implemented and assessed in Bergen, this campaign produced a decrease of some 50% in rates of bullying [Olweus, 1993]. However, the campaign as implemented and assessed in Rogaland (around Stavanger) seemed to have only a very small impact. This may reflect the greater level of support systems for schools in the Bergen campaign [Roland, this issue].

Following this work, a substantial monitored intervention campaign was carried out in Sheffield, England, from 1991 to 1994. This produced reductions in bullying in most participating schools; and those schools that made more effort (in policy development, curriculum and playground work, and focused work with individuals and groups) had the most impact. However, the overall level of reduction in victimization averaged out at around 15% to 20% [Smith and Sharp, 1994].

Since then, other intervention campaigns have been under way in Toronto, Canada [Pepler et al., 1993]; in the Flanders region of Belgium [Stevens and van Oost, 1994]; and in Schleswig-Holstein in Germany [Hanewinkel and Knaack, 1997], all modeled to some extent on the Olweus program in Bergen. The evaluation of these program initiatives is beginning to become available, but it is rather early yet to summarize the findings. However, the picture may be a complex one of limited successes and failures. Certainly, a follow-up of some of the Sheffield project schools points out the difficulties as well as possibilities of school-based interventions [Eslea and Smith, 1998].

The "learning process" in designing such interventions on a broad scale is well exemplified in the account by Roland [this issue] of the history of interventions in Norway, now, as he describes it, about to enter its third phase. The second phase, in 1996, embodied support systems of trained pupils plus local professionals, and an emphasis on relationships in school going beyond just bullying. In the third phase, improvements in the support system are planned, plus a broad focus on "basic relations" among adults and children, to be implemented at class and school levels. Methods of evaluation of this phase of activity are currently being debated.

Our knowledge of characteristics of children involved in bully-victim relationships, and their social networks, should continue to inform us more deeply of possibilities and difficulties of school-based interventions. The action research implied in assessing actual interventions is also giving us valuable lessons; the successes can inspire us, but the failures or more limited successes may also give us much useful information. "We learn from our mistakes." There will be more mistakes as well as more successes in the years to come. Given the normative nature of bullying, it will be a continual struggle to keep it to within acceptable limits—limits such that suicides caused by bullying, actual physical harm to victims, or life-long depression and feelings of low self-worth in those victimized become rare indeed. Such a goal will, however, be a most worthwhile one for the combined efforts of researchers and practitioners to try to achieve.

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