The Culture of Bullying in Middle School

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

James D. Unnever Dewey G. Cornell

**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this study was to assess the nature and ex- tent of student attitudes toward bullying. We investigated the consis- tency and prevalence of student attitudes across gender, race, socioeco- nomic status, and grade level. We also assessed whether students with positive attitudes toward peer aggression and students with higher trait anger were especially prone to support a normative structure that encour- ages bullying. Based on a data set including 6 middle schools and over 2,400 students, our results indicate that a culture of bullying is a perva- sive phenomenon among middle school students and should be an impor- tant consideration in bullying prevention efforts.

**KEYWORDS.** Bullying, gender, race, aggression, middle school Most bully prevention programs include efforts to change the school cli-

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

mate and counter prevailing attitudes that support bullying behavior (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1994; Olweus, 1993; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000). Presumably, a widespread, whole-school intervention will restructure the school climate with the intent of reducing the opportunities and incentives for bullying (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1993). The purpose of this study was to assess the nature and extent of student atti- tudes regarding bullying behavior among middle school students. We investi- gated the consistency and prevalence of student attitudes across gender, race, socioeconomic status, and grade level in six middle schools. Moreover, we as- sessed whether students with positive attitudes toward peer aggression and students with higher trait anger were especially prone to support bullying be- havior.

Bullying is a pervasive problem found in schools worldwide (Nansel et al.,

2001; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1996; Olweus, 1993). Bullying is usually defined as aggressive behavior that is distinguished from fights or arguments between students of equal strength. Bullying can take the form of physical ag- gression, verbal abusiveness, or control of social interactions to harm or humil- iate the victim (Olweus, 1993). Victims of bullying suffer serious consequences that can have lasting impact on their social and emotional adjustment (Olweus, 1993). A survey of 6,500 students found bully victimization rates to be twice as high among middle school students (12%) as among high school students (6%; Nolin et al., 1996).

# DEFINING A CULTURE OF BULLYING

Whole-school violence prevention programs contend that changing the so- cial context of the school is necessary to reduce the prevalence of victimization (Astor et al., 2002). Researchers are currently in the process of defining the school climate that supports bullying behavior, verifying its existence, and un- derstanding how it functions. Naylor and Cowie (1999) refer to the school cli- mate that facilitates bullying behavior as the school “ethos” and Cowie and

Olafsson (2000) define it as a “bullying culture.” For the purposes of this pa- per, we refer to the school climate that supports bullying behavior as the “cul- ture of bullying.”

Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler (1995) succinctly describe the basic compo- nents of the culture of bullying and how they facilitate bullying behavior. They argue that bullying behavior occurs within the wider system of the school and “the aggression of bullies is inextricably linked to the passivity of victims in a context where adults are generally unaware of the extent of the problem, and other children are unsure about whether or how to get involved” (Charach et al., 1995, p. 17). Salmivalli (1999) adds that bullying is a group phenomenon that is facilitated by students taking on different class roles including students who assist or reinforce the bully and students who are passive bystanders.

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

The work by Charach et al. (1995) and Salmivalli (1999) and others (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Pepler et al., 1993; Salmivalli, Karhunen, & Lagerspetz, 1996; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998) suggest that bullying occurs in a context where students hold a diversity of be- liefs about bullying. This extant research indicates that some students have prosocial views, empathize with the victim, and, at times, will intervene to stop bullying behavior. However, it also indicates that a large percentage of stu- dents are uncertain as to how they feel about bullying behavior and tend to be passive bystanders. Furthermore, it indicates that a significant number of stu- dents support bullying behavior and may assist or reinforce the bully. A con- clusion that can be drawn from the prior research is that schools rarely hold bullies accountable for their behavior.

In summary, a culture of bullying is a multidimensional phenomenon char- acterized by a normative set of shared beliefs that support or encourage bully- ing behavior (Smith & Brain, 2000). These beliefs result in behaviors that directly or inadvertently support bullying behavior (Olweus et al., 1999). Di- rect manifestations of the culture of bullying include students assisting and re- inforcing the bully. An indirect manifestation includes students and teachers watching a student being bullied and failing to intervene. These manifestations result in bullies being rewarded, enabled, and empowered (Sutton & Smith, 1999).

# EVIDENCE OF A CULTURE OF BULLYING

Researchers using a variety of different methodologies are beginning to un- cover the basic contours of the culture of bullying. Cowie and Olafsson (2000) used the Olweus questionnaire and discovered that just 34% of male Austra- lian high school students (n = 311) believed that their fellow classmates would intervene when someone is being bullied. They also found that the majority of students who were bullied failed to report their victimization to either teachers or anyone at home. Cowie and Olafsson attributed this recalcitrance to a fear of reprisals or an anxiety about appearing to be weak. They concluded, for this one all male high school in a disadvantaged area, “the students’ responses indi- cated that violence, fear, and exploitation were normal parts of the pupils’ ex- periences at school” (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000, p. 92).

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

Pepler et al. (1993), using the Olweus questionnaire, also found evidence of a set of beliefs among Canadian students that support bullying. They found that only 32% of the students (n = 211) in grades 3/4 to grade 8 reported that their peers frequently tried to stop bullying and 13% indicated that peers inter- vene at least occasionally. Pepler et al. noted that the majority of students re- ported that they personally would not try to help another student who is being bullied. They further found that only 25% of the students reported that they be- lieved teachers almost always tried to stop bullying behavior. Additionally, Pepler et al. reported a potential social contagion effect: A third of the students indicated that they could join in on the bullying of a student they did not like. They concluded by arguing that bullying “is a complex problem embedded in a number of systems that may inadvertently model, reinforce and maintain bul- lying interactions” (Pepler et al., 1993, p. 91).

Aspects of the culture of bullying have also been uncovered using method- ologies other than the survey. O’Connell et al. (1999) unobtrusively video taped Canadian students in naturalistic settings and recorded targeted students who wore a small remote microphone and pocket-sized transmitter. They fo- cused on bully episodes that contained a peer group of two or more classmates. The sample included two schools and a subsample of approximately 120 stu- dents. O’Connell et al. found that most often the peer group consisted of both boys and girls, and that peer groups actively reinforced the bullying behavior 20.7% of the time. Additionally, they established that peers passively rein- forced the bully the majority of the time by watching without joining in and that peers only intervened in a quarter of the episodes. Notably, O’Connell et al. (1999) regressed three dependent variables, time spent modeling the bully, passively reinforcing the bully, and supporting the victim on school (A or B), peer gender, and grade level. They found that older boys were more likely to join in with the bully; none of the variables was related to passive reinforce- ment; and young and older girls were more likely to support the victim than older boys.

Using the same data collection strategies outlined above, Craig et al. (2000)

were able to capture the culture of bullying as it manifested itself across play- ground and classroom settings. While limited in their sample size (n = 34), they found that peers were present as observers during most bullying episodes

regardless of the setting. However, they rarely intervened. Also noteworthy, Craig et al. found teachers seldom intervened to stop bullying. They observed that teachers only intervened 18% of the time to stop a bullying episode in the classroom and 15% of the time in the playground. Craig et al. (2000) argued that these low levels of intervention convey a tacit message that there is little discouragement and minimal risk in bullying; the lack of intervention inadver- tently teaches students that bullying is acceptable and appropriate in certain settings.

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

Research by Salmivalli (1999), Salmivalli et al. (1996), and Salmivalli et al. (1998) considered the behavior of students other than the bully and victim. This research analyzed data representing 23 sixth grade classes from 11 Finn- ish schools (n = 573) collected through a questionnaire and sociometric proce- dures. It found that there are five basic patterns of behavior surrounding the bully-victim dyad. These patterns include students who report that they ea- gerly join in the bullying, assistants, and students who actively watch the bully event by inciting or encouraging the bully, reinforcers. There are also students who comfort the victim and try to stop the student from being bullied, defend- ers. The largest percentage of students Salmivalli classifies as outsiders. These students do not take sides; they passively watch the bullying event. Salmivalli (1999) concluded that most students act in ways that enable the bully despite reporting that they are against bullying.

# INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

***IN STUDENT SUPPORT FOR BULLYING***

We recognize that there will be important individual differences among stu- dents in their support or tolerance for bullying (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998) that may be distinguished from cultural or social influences. In order to distinguish cultural influences on bullying from individual, personality influ- ences, and to examine how cultural influences might interact with individual differences, we selected cognitive and affective factors that are widely recog- nized in broader research on aggressive behavior. Prior research on cognitive influences on aggression indicates that aggressive youths believe that aggres- sive behavior is an effective way to solve problems and that hitting others may enhance their peer status (Bentley & Li, 1995; Cornell & Loper, 1998; Guerra, Eron, Huesmann, McConville & Cornell, 2001; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby & Guerra, 1988; Tolan & Van Acker, 1997). Therefore, we hy- pothesized that, cognitively, students who hold more aggressive attitudes, de- fined as attitudes that endorse the use of physical aggression in dealing with peers, would be more inclined to identify with the culture of bullying.

Theoretical models of aggression also distinguish cognitive beliefs that support aggressive actions from the affective influence of anger (Berkowitz, 1993). Several studies have demonstrated that adolescents scoring high on measures of trait anger are at increased risk for aggressive behavior (Cornell, Peterson, & Richards, 1999; Granic & Butler, 1998). Clearly, anger can exert a strong motivational influence on aggression, yet it is neither necessary nor suf- ficient to produce aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1993; Dodge, 1991). Berkowitz (1993) and Dodge (1991) theorized that anger is especially impor- tant in emotional or reactive aggression, but it is not particularly important for instrumental or more goal-directed aggression. Bullying and other actions to dominate peers could be regarded as instrumental aggression (Dodge, 1991). However, there is mixed evidence regarding the kind of aggression that char- acterizes bullying. Roland and Idsoe (2001) reported that proactive aggres- siveness was more strongly related to bullying than reactive aggressiveness, and that proactive aggressiveness was increasingly related to bullying in older (eighth grade) students than younger (fifth grade) students. Salmivalli and Nieminen (2002) found that peers and teachers rated bullies (ages 10-12) high on both reactive and proactive aggression, in comparison to victims and con- trol students.

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

Based on research linking anger, reactive aggression, and bullying, we hy- pothesized that anger would also play a role in the beliefs and attitudes that maintain a culture of bullying. Therefore, we tested the hypothesis that stu- dents with a propensity toward anger in response to others would be affectively predisposed toward identifying with the culture of bullying.

# RESEARCH GOALS

This paper extends the previous research that has investigated the existence of a school climate that supports bullying in three ways. First, prior studies, conducted primarily outside the United States, have been limited in sample size, diversity of students, and number of schools studied. We extend the prior research by analyzing a relatively large data set that includes a socially and economically diverse population of over 2,400 middle school students in six middle schools in the United States. Second, the prior research has not exten- sively investigated whether the school climate that supports bullying behavior varies across the demographic characteristics of the students. We hypothe- sized that the culture of bullying would be manifest across all grade levels, that it would be present in boys and girls, and that it would be evident across socio- economic status and racial groups. Third, previous studies have not investi- gated whether the culture of bullying is related to cognitive and affective differences among students. We extend the prior research by examining whether students who hold aggressive attitudes and students who report higher levels of anger are more likely to support bullying behavior.

# METHOD

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

***Sample***

The data we employed in this study were collected for a project designed to gather baseline measures of school bullying and school violence. School ad- ministrators contacted the first author for assistance in designing a survey, but maintained authority and responsibility for administering the survey. Because the survey was anonymous and individual students would not be identified, the school division decided to inform parents about the survey and give them the option to refuse participation (passive consent), but did not require signed con- sent. The sample was drawn from all six public middle schools in Roanoke, Virginia, a metropolitan area with a diverse population of nearly 100,000 in- habitants. The six middle schools served a total enrollment of 3,038 students in grades six, seven, and eight. Approximately, 46.5% of the middle schools stu- dent population was nonwhite, 52% received a free or reduced cost breakfast or lunch at school, and 50% were male. The percentage of students receiving some services in special education based on an IEP (individualized education plan) was 19.6% and the dropout rate for the middle schools in 1999-2000 was 1.9%.

All middle school students in attendance on the day of the survey were eli- gible for the study.1 In all, 2,472 students completed the survey (a response rate of 81%). School administrators sent an opt-out letter to all the par- ents/guardians of the students before the administration of the survey. The par- ents of 42 students declined to allow their children to participate in the survey. Teachers administered an anonymous survey in classrooms during the fall of 2000. The response rate was lowered by student absences on the day of the sur- vey and by other factors such as field trips. An 81% response rate is compara- ble to other school survey studies (Cornell & Loper, 1998).

The respondents who completed the survey closely matched the total popu- lation of students. The percentage of students who reported they were non-white was 40% in comparison to the student population of 46.5%; the per- centage of male study participants was 48.9% in comparison to the student population of 50%; and the percentage of students who reported that they re- ceived a free or reduced cost breakfast or lunch was 49.8% in comparison to the student population, for grades 7-12, of 52%.

Thirty-one surveys were deleted in which the students gave the same re- sponse to every question on one or more pages (excluding the pages focused on bullying and having been bullied). In addition, four surveys were dropped in which the student reported an unlikely height (over six foot five inches) or weight (over 300 pounds). School principals confirmed that no students in the school were this large.

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

# Procedures

Using LISREL 8.50 for Windows and the EM algorithm (Schafer, 1997), we substituted values for missing cases. The EM algorithm generated values based on a data set that included the variables used in the present analysis. All analyses were run with and without missing cases; the results did not differ substantively. After imputing values for the missing cases, the sample in- cluded 2,437 middle school students. For our multivariate analyses, we used ordinary least squares as the estimation procedure.

# Measures

*The culture of bullying*. We used five questions to assess whether there is a culture of bullying.2 These questions are from the Olweus’ 1998 bully survey and have been investigated by other researchers (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Pepler et al., 1993). These questions included “How often do *other students* try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school?” (emphases are in the original) and “How often do the *teachers or other adults at school* try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school?” The responses for these questions ranged from 0 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). We also used “When you see a student your age being bullied at school, what do you *feel or think*?” Its responses were 0 (that is probably what he or she deserves), 1 (I don’t feel much), 2 (I feel a bit sorry for him or her), and 3 (I feel sorry for him or her and want to help him or her). We additionally used “Do you think you could join in bullying a student whom you didn’t like?” The responses to this question were 0 (yes), 1 (yes, maybe), 2 (I don’t know), 3 (no, I don’t think so), 4 (no), and 5 (definitely no). The last question we analyzed was “Overall, how much do you think *your teachers* have done to *counteract bullying* since school started in August?” Its responses were 0 (little or nothing), 1 (fairly lit- tle), 2 (somewhat), 3 (a good deal), and 4 (much). We reversed coded and summed across the responses to these five questions and created a scale. Higher scores indicate a stronger identification with the culture of bullying.

*Demographic measures*. The demographic measures included gender (1 = male, 0 = female), socioeconomic status, race, and grade level. Socioeconomic status was approximated by whether students reported they received a free or reduced cost meal at school (1 = yes free meal,0= no free meal). Of the 2,437 students, 49% reported receiving a free or reduced cost breakfast or lunch at school. For race, we included a dichotomous variable to identify Afri- can-American students (1 = African-American, 0 = other), the only minority group large enough for statistical analysis (40% of the 2,437 students). We also included student grade level (grades six, seven, and eight).

Downloaded by [Bangor University] at 20:09 31 December 2014

*Aggressive attitudes and anger*. Five items derived from previous research

(McConville & Cornell, 2001; Slaby & Guerra, 1988) were used to assess nor- mative beliefs about aggression. These items have been found to be predictive of peer aggression and disciplinary infractions at school (McConville & Cor- nell, 2001). These five items are included in the Appendix. The responses to these items ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The scores were reversed coded, summed across the five items, and were standardized. Higher scores indicate students with more aggressive attitudes. The standard- ized alpha coefficient for Aggressive attitudes was .80.

Anger was measured using four items. These items are included in the Ap-

pendix. Grasmick et al. (1993) used these four items to assess the level of an- ger, which was one aspect of their multidimensional self-control scale. Self-control has been widely used in sociological research, but has not been widely used in psychological studies (Pratt & Cullen, 2000). The responses ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The scores were re- verse coded, summed across the five items, and were standardized. Higher scores indicate angrier students. The standardized alpha coefficient for Anger was .77.

NOTES

1. An alternative school with 50 seventh and eighth graders was excluded from par- ticipation in the survey by the school administration.
2. The survey instrument included Olweus’ (1993) definition of bullying: ‘a student is being bullied when another student, or several other students

* say mean and hurtful things or make fun of him or her or call him or her mean and hurtful names
* completely ignore or exclude him or her from their group of friends or leave him

or her out of things on purpose

* hit, kick, push, shove around, or lock him or her inside a room
* tell lies or spread false rumors about him or her or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike him or her
* and other hurtful things like that.

When we talk about bullying, these things happen repeatedly, and it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself. We also call it bullying, when a student is teased repeatedly in a mean and hurtful way. But we don’t call it bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way. Also, it is not bullying when two students of about equal strength or power argue or fight.’