Bullying: Recent Developments

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As part of the increasing human rights agenda of the last century, the individual right not to be bullied or harassed in school has gathered considerable academic, social and political attention. This article reviews recent developments in this area, including: the definition and scope of bullying behaviours; roles in bullying; methods of study; correlates of bully and victim status; coping strategies, and peer support against bullying; the outcomes of large-scale intervention studies; and suggestions for future action.

Keywords: Bully; victim; school; intervention

Introduction

In a twenty-first century climate of increasing concern for rights of individuals and groups, whether due to race, sex, disability, religion, or sexual orientation, the right to be educated without suffering from victimisation has resonated with professionals and the public, and the issue is often picked up by the media. This has interacted in a synergistic fashion with the growth of research. The topic of ‘bullying’ has mushroomed in academic journals and conferences. At last year’s Society for Research in Child Development conference in Tampa, there were 30 index entries to bullying, compared to only 16 two years earlier (in Minneapolis, 2001). If we take the modern study of bullying as dating from Olweus’ first book, Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys, published in 1978, then we now have 25 years of research history, although concerted international work only begins to date from around 10–15 years ago, following the Stavanger conference (1988), the first UK books (1989), the dissemination of the Bergen intervention results (1993), and the results of the Sheffield project (1994). A more recent compendium of studies (Smith et al., 1999) provides a selection of research studies on bullying and victimisation.

Definition and scope

‘Bullying’ is now widely defined as a ‘systematic abuse of power’ (Rigby, 2002), and more specifically as intentional aggressive behaviour that is repeated against a victim who cannot readily defend him- or herself (Olweus, 1999). As such, bullying can happen in many contexts. This review will focus on school bullying, which has the longest history of research, spanning a quarter of a century. It will focus on pupil-pupil bullying; it is also true that teachers can bully pupils, and pupils can bully teachers (Terry, 1998). In addition, teachers can bully teachers, a form of workplace bullying. There has been considerable work in the last decade on workplace bullying (Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999), and on prison bullying (Ireland, 2000); these mainly involve adults, though some of the prison bullying research has focused on Young Offender Institutions. Bullying in the home environment, which often involves children, generally goes by the name of ‘abuse’, and will not be reviewed here except insofar as it relates to school bullying (for a survey and review see Cawson, 2002). A book by Rigby (2002) covers bullying in these broader senses.

All definitions are fuzzy. Does ‘intentional’ simply mean an intention to do the act that is aggressive (without necessarily understanding the consequences), or a full intention to hurt the victim? Is the aggression, or hurt, judged by an outsider, or does it rely on the perception of the victim? Does repetition mean more than once, or over some (unspecified) duration of time? Can imbalance of power be inferred from the subjective perception of the victim, as well as from more objective criteria such as strength, or number of bullies? These matters need consideration but should not prevent (and have not prevented) research.

In order to be valuable, research needs to be abreast of current issues of definition and scope. In the 1980s, aggression and bullying were primarily seen as direct physical or verbal attacks. Throughout the 1990s, through the work of Bjorkqvist, Crick, Underwood and others, the scope has been broadened to include indirect aggression (done via a third party), relational aggression (done to damage someone’s peer relationships), and social aggression (done to damage self-esteem and/or social status) (see Underwood, 2002 for discussion). In terms of prototypical examples, in addition to hitting (prototypical physical) and nasty teasing (prototypical verbal), we can now commonly consider spreading nasty stories (prototypical indirect) and social exclusion (prototypical relational/social) as other forms of bullying. These latter forms are not yet so fully recognised as ‘bullying’. Only 62% of English 14-year-olds agreed that social exclusion was bullying, compared to 94% and 91% for physical and verbal forms respectively (Smith et al., 2002).

Generally, although males engage in more physical aggression and bullying, the difference is less pronounced for verbal bullying and is sometimes reversed for indirect bullying. A meta-analysis of 35 child and...
adolescent study samples by Scheitauer (2002) found evidence that the sex difference in indirect/relational aggression is overall rather small (in favour of girls), but age-dependent; the gender difference is appreciable in young children (below 7 years), near zero in middle childhood (8–12 years) perhaps as boys ‘catch up’ in these more skilful forms of aggression, but adolescent girls again show more indirect/relational aggression (above 12 years), perhaps as the two sexes now specialise in forms of aggression more suited to their peer group structure.

Although forms of bullying are rather similar in western countries, in Japan (where it is referred to as ‘ijime’) and Korea (referred to colloquially as ‘wang-ta’) it can take rather different forms, as cross-national comparisons have shown (Morita et al., 1999; Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002). Bullying is often by older pupils from higher years, is mostly physical and verbal, and often involves pupils who were not previously friends. By contrast, ijime is usually within the year group and class of the pupil, and often takes the form of a systematic social exclusion by classmates including former friends. In Korea, similarly, ‘wang-ta’ refers to social exclusion by all classmates, and ‘jun-ta’ to exclusion by a whole school (Kwak & Koo, 2004).

Internationally, other methods of bullying are also appearing. A survey of 656 young people aged 11–19 in 2002 found that 16% had received threatening text messages, 7% had been harassed in Internet chat rooms, and 4% by email. So far as school experiences specifically were concerned, Rivers (personal communication, 2002), in a survey using an Olweus-type questionnaire with over 2,000 pupils in years 7 and 8, found that about 6% of pupils reported having been sent nasty or threatening text messages or emails, though this only occurred ‘often’ for about 1%.

Roles in bullying

Besides the traditional roles of bully, victim, and non-involved, a number of studies have examined the situation of bully-victims or provocative or aggressive victims – children showing characteristics of both bully and victim. Not surprisingly, a number of studies suggest that these children are more at risk than either ‘pure bullies’ or ‘pure victims’ (Duncan, 1999; Wolke et al., 2000).

The work of Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) opened up the dynamics of bullying further, by suggesting that bullying children could be considered as either ring-leaders (organising a group of bullies and initiating the bullying), followers (who join in the bullying once it is started), and reinforcingers (who do not actively join in, but reinforce more passively by watching and laughing or encouraging the bullying). Salmivalli also distinguished outsiders (who are completely non-involved) and defenders (who help the victim, get help, or tell the bullies to stop). Salmivalli’s work with adolescents in Finland was based on peer nominations. Sutton and Smith (1999) used a similar procedure with 8–11-year-olds in England. Monks, Smith and Swettenham (2003) used a modified cartoon task version with 4–5-year-olds, and found that at this age it was mainly just the bully (or aggressor), victim and defender roles that could be elicited reliably.

The distinction Salmivalli made between types of bullying children proved useful in a study by Sutton, Smith and Swettenham (1999) on theory of mind; ringleader bullies (who might especially need good social-cognitive skills to operate effectively) came out highest on theory of mind and emotion understanding tasks (though not on empathy). However, the ringleader, follower and reinforcing roles do inter-correlate quite highly, so the roles are probably more a useful conceptual tool than definitely labelling certain discrete types of children.

Pepler, Craig and Roberts (1998), on the basis of playground observations, argue that bullying is often watched by a number of children who are not reinforcements in the Salmivalli sense (they may not be laughing and encouraging the bullies), but that their non-intervention is in itself a form of complicity and reinforcement of the bullying behaviour. Olweus (2000) has proposed a curvilinear scale of roles in terms of attitudes to bullying, from the bullying roles through to reinforcingers, bystanders who do not disapprove of the bullying, bystanders who do not like the bullying but are afraid to challenge it, and finally defenders who are prepared to challenge the bullying. These outsider-defender distinctions are important in considering the development of peer support systems, which aim to move children along this scale and increase the number of defenders.

Methods of study

The large scale surveys of bullying in schools generally rely on pupil self-report data, using the Olweus questionnaire, the Arora Life in Schools questionnaire, or similar instruments. These usually (though not necessarily) yield anonymous data. Work at a class level and investigating roles in bullying and correlates of these roles usually uses peer nomination procedures. Some studies use teacher reports; these are generally considered less reliable than self- or peer reports, as teachers are often not told of bullying; however, at younger ages (nursery and infant school), where child reports may be less reliable, teacher reports may be relatively more useful (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002; Monks et al., 2003). Finally, observational methods can give more ‘objective’ information, although its collection and analysis is generally very time-consuming. Pepler and colleagues have developed a system for observing playground behaviour, including bullying, using long-range filming and use of radio-microphones (Pepler et al., 1998).

Agreement between methods is far from perfect. In a meta-analysis, Card (2003) reported on correlations of victim scores across methods. The correlation between self and peer report averaged 0.37 across 21 studies; adult (usually teacher) reports correlated 0.29 with self-reports (5 studies) and 0.42 with peer reports (7 studies). Observational data correlated 0.21 with self-reports and 0.16 with peer reports, but were based on only two studies. These correlations are modest; studies using different methods might clearly produce different findings. Pellegrini and Bartini (2000) have argued that, wherever possible, future studies should use multi-method approaches to the constructs of bully and victim.
Correlates of bully and victim status

There is general agreement that bullying children share many characteristics with generally more aggressive children, including hot temperament; home background with less affection, more violence and low parental monitoring; and a view of relationships that positively values aggression and bullying as a means of achieving power and influence in a tough peer group environment (Olweus, 1999). There is less agreement in some other areas. Crick and Dodge (1999) believe that bullies have low social skills, but this was disputed by Sutton et al. (1999), and the findings of Kaikainen et al. (1999) that children high in indirect aggression are also high in social intelligence.

Another area of dispute is whether bullies have low self-esteem. Some writers, including O’Moore (2000), have evidence that they do; others that they do not (Olweus, 1999). In part, the difference may be due to differing samples (including whether bully-victims are included in the bullies) and different methodologies; also, bullies may score average on self-esteem tests but actually have a ‘defensive egotism’ – thinking highly of themselves but very sensitive to any criticism (Salmivalli et al., 1999).

There is both a greater volume of work on victim status and, arguably, greater consensus. The Hawker and Boulton meta-analysis (2000) established depression, anxiety and low self-esteem as consistent correlates of victim experience. Card (2003) has carried out a meta-analysis of 205 studies written in English that have relevant data on victim correlates (the number of studies relevant to particular characteristics varying from 5 to 123). The largest effect sizes are for peer group variables: peer rejection (.38), poor friendship quality (.23), low number of friends (.20) and low peer acceptance (.19); and for some personal variables: low self-concept (self-esteem) (.29), low physical strength (.28), low school enjoyment (.21), poor social skills (.19) and high internalising and externalising problems (both .19).

Family factors were also implicated in this review, though with lower effect sizes. There is some evidence that victims may come from over-protective or enmeshed families. In addition, there has been recent work on sibling bullying. In a US sample, Duncan (1999) found a significant association between bullying and victimisation between siblings, and in school. This association was particularly strong for bully-victims. Similar associations between sibling and peer bullying and victimisation were reported in an Israeli sample by Wolke and Samara (2004).

Ethnicity did not emerge as a major risk factor in the Card (2003) review. Sexual orientation was not considered, but there is evidence in secondary schools of peer victimisation of sexual minorities (Rivers, 2001). A more well-researched area is disability, another risk factor apparently not covered in the Card review. There is good evidence for substantially increased risk of victimisation for children with disabilities (Nabuzoka, 2000; Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003). They may have particular characteristics that make them an easy target; in mainstream settings they are often less well integrated socially and lack the protection against bullying that friendship gives; and those with behavioural problems may act out in an aggressive way and become provocative victims.

The predominant model for victimisation is that family, personal and interpersonal factors combine as risk factors. Some children are more at risk (through familial over-protection, shyness, or physical weakness), and this risk of victimisation is moderated by both the number and quality of friends they have, and their general standing in the peer group. A longitudinal study of 10 year-old US children (Hodges et al., 1999) found that having high status or high quality friends interacts with internalising behaviours (shyness, etc) as protective and risk factors in victimisation. Schwarz et al. (2000) reported that in 8–9 year-olds, an earlier harsh home environment (harsh discipline, marital conflict, abuse) predicted both victimisation and aggression scores at school, but only for children with few current reciprocal friends; suggesting the protective effect of friends for children ‘at risk’ from home environment.

A rather different model has been proposed by Schuster (1999). On the basis of peer nomination work in a large number of German classrooms, Schuster found that almost every class has one or two victims; very few have none, and very few have more than two. Schuster argued that this can be explained by a ‘scapegoat’ model; each class ‘needs’ a victim, in some psychodynamic sense. Replication work is clearly called for this finding; to date, work in school classes in England does not provide strong support for Schuster’s finding (Mahdavi & Smith, 2003).

Coping strategies, and peer support against bullying

Pupils adopt a variety of coping strategies when bullied. Studies suggest that the success of these varies, and is age- and gender-dependent, but non-assertive strategies such as crying are less successful than ignoring or seeking help. The success of seeking help will depend on the school context; and one important part of school context appears to be the existence of peer support systems, which can encourage the ‘seeking help’ strategy, whether from peer supporters, teachers or others (Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001).

There has been growing interest in peer support and mediation as an approach to bullying. These methods hold promise, but more evaluation research is needed. In a review of peer support methods (Cowie, 2000), it is argued that evaluations so far suggest clear benefits for the peer supporters themselves, and general improvement of school climate; but specific benefits for victims of bullying remain to be proven. Evaluations of active listening/counselling-based approaches (Cowie et al., 2002) found that the majority of peer supporters reported benefits arising from the interpersonal skills and teamwork acquired in training; users reported that peer supporters offered helpful interventions; and most pupils and teachers believed that the service was having an impact on the school as a whole. There can also be problems due to some hostility to peer helpers from other pupils, difficulties in recruiting boys as peer supporters, and issues of power sharing with staff, and ensuring sufficient time and resources for proper implementation.
Outcomes of large-scale intervention studies

There have now been over 12 large-scale (multiple-school) intervention studies against bullying, carried out in various countries. Inspired by the Norwegian nationwide campaign and the development of the Olweus anti-bullying program, and later the Sheffield project, there has been similar work in the USA, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland and Australia. Results are varied. Although the Olweus program produces successful results in Norway, its replication in the USA, Germany and Belgium has had much more modest success (see Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). The outcomes of the Sheffield project – reductions of around 5–20% in victimisation rates – while more modest than the results in Bergen, are also more typical of the range of findings from these further studies.

Various factors may account for these varying success rates, and act as pointers to the future (Smith et al., 2003; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, in press). Regarding factors that have influenced the varying success rates, the nature of the intervention work might seem the most obvious candidate; to date, however, no ‘magic ingredient’ has been discovered, and the extent of work on a number of fronts is a good predictor of outcomes. Arguably, the most important factor is the extent to which schools take ownership of the anti-bullying work, whatever form it takes, and push it forward effectively and persistently; this appears to correlate with outcomes more than the extent to which schools receive support from outside. The length of the intervention may also be a factor. A sustained period of intervention, together with mechanisms to ensure that anti-bullying work is maintained at some level after the initial intensive intervention phase, are important; bullying is an ongoing problem, so a ‘one-off’ effort over a term or a year without continuation will have little or no lasting impact. It also needs to be recognised that, at present, work in primary schools is often more successful than in secondary schools; in the latter, peer group attitudes against victims tend to harden, especially in boys (Olweus & Endresen, 1998).

Suggestions for future action

The existing research gives a number of pointers as to how to improve intervention effectiveness in the future. More attention may need to be paid to girls bullying, and rumour-spreading and social exclusion; at present, anti-bullying materials often emphasise the more obvious physical and direct verbal forms. Awareness of different roles may help; peer support schemes can aim to turn ‘bystanders’ into ‘defenders’ (Cowie, 2000), and we need to be aware of the clever (though manipulative) social skills of many bullies. Also, since roles take time to get established, starting anti-bullying work early, including, for example, awareness raising and assertiveness training in infant and junior schools, may be important. There is also some debate about the extent to which anti-bullying work should focus on broader school climate issues, and relationships in school, rather than specifically on bullying (Roland & Galloway, 2002).

Teachers have good knowledge about some aspects of bullying but do not feel fully equipped to tackle it (Nicolaides, Toda, & Smith, 2002). In England and Wales, the DfES pack, Don’t suffer in silence, originally produced from the Sheffield project, was issued in a second edition in 2000 (with minor amendments again in 2002). A teacher-based evaluation of the pack (Smith & Samara, 2003) suggests that the pack was found useful by schools, and that particularly highly rated interventions were the whole-school policy, circle time, cooperative group work, active listening/counselling based approaches, and involving parents. Nearly one-half of schools thought there had been a decrease in bullying since using the pack (with only 6% reporting an increase). For this and recent research in England, including a study conducted with ChildLine, see http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/. For a recent research briefing in Northern Ireland, see Department of Education (2002). For research and activity in Scotland see http://www.sacre.ac.uk/bully/index.html and http://www.antibullying.net/newslettervoices.htm

Regular inspections of schools by OFSTED address the issue of whether bullying is a problem in a school, and measures taken to combat it; for a recent report on the efforts of secondary schools to tackle bullying, see http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/. Since 1996 several successful legal actions have been taken by pupils or their parents against schools in which they were persistently bullied. In England and Wales, since September 1999 Section 61(4)(B) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires that ‘The Head Teacher shall determine measures (which may include the making of rules, and provision for enforcing them) to be taken with a view to … (b) encouraging good behaviour and respect for others on the part of pupils and, in particular, preventing all forms of bullying among pupils’. Thus, virtually all schools now have an anti-bullying policy (Smith & Samara, 2003). As yet, there is no clear evidence that the quality or content of anti-bullying policies, in themselves, predict victimisation rates (Woods & Wolke, 2003); one challenge now is to ensure that school policies form a sound base for further action, informed by the continuing research on the issue.

At the time of writing, the DfES has announced new anti-bullying initiatives (Tackling bullying, improving behaviour, and attendance; 3 September 2003). The Welsh Assembly Government has issued guidance on tackling bullying in schools (Respecting others, released 24 September 2003, see http://www.learning.wales.gov.uk/). The BBC has a website on the issue with many useful links, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/bullying/. The National Children’s Bureau has sponsored an Anti-Bullying Alliance, see http://www.ncb.org.uk/aba/, which aims to promote children’s safety in all areas of life. This continuing commitment to action is encouraging, and as with all initiatives, evaluation of their effects will help us build for the future. Schools have a vital role in reducing bullying; but the impact of the wider society – parenting skills and behaviours, portrayals of violence in the mass media, and attitudes to aggression, bullying and violence in society, the workplace (including among teachers), and the local community – all have an influence. The concern with the ‘systematic abuse of power’ in schools has a legitimate and important focus on relationships in
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