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What is bullying? A theoretical redefinition

Anthony A. Volk ^{a,*}, Andrew V. Dane ^b, Zopito A. Marini ^a

^a Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada

^b Andrew Dane, Department of Psychology, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada



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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon that directly affects hundreds of millions of people each year. The importance of bullying has led to research in the last two decades that has produced hundreds, if not thousands, of papers on the topic. In large part this research was stimulated by a definition provided by Olweus in 1993. That definition has proven to be tremendously useful as a starting point for research, but it was created in the absence of recent empirical and theoretical evidence. We propose an updated definition that is explicitly grounded in a unifying theory that encompasses ecological and evolutionary contexts: "bullying is aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance". We follow this definition with an examination of the theoretical and empirical support for each of its three elements (goal-directedness, power imbalance, and harm). We suggest that bullying measures should be based on assessments of these three elements of bullying. Our redefinition also emphasizes the importance of considering and altering the cost-benefit analysis of bullying as a cornerstone for successful interventions. Finally we address several specific potential challenges to the definition.

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Introduction

Bullying is a centuries old term that, according to Merriam-Webster (2013), was first coined from German in 1538 and means one of three things: a fine chap, a hired ruffian, or a blustering brow-

* Corresponding author. Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University, St Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1. Fax: (905) 641-2509.

E-mail address: tvolk@brocku.ca (A.A. Volk).

beating person – especially one who is cruel to others who are weaker. The third definition is now most commonly used. However, there are some discrepancies between this popular dictionary definition and the definitions used by researchers. Within research circles, the most familiar and widely cited (4900 times) definition of bullying comes from Dan Olweus, originally proposed in the 1970s and reiterated in the now classic book “Bullying in School” (1993). He defines bullying as: “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students.” He then further clarifies the components of this definition:

“It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another, basically what is implied in the definition of aggressive behavior. Negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or mean gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group. In order to use the term bullying, there should also be an imbalance in strength (an asymmetric power relationship): the student who is exposed to the negative actions has difficulty defending him-/herself and is somewhat helpless against the student or students who harass. In my definition, the phenomenon of bullying is thus characterized by the following criteria: it is aggressive behavior or *intentional* ‘harm doing,’ which is carried out *repeatedly and over time* in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power” (Olweus, 1993, pp. 8–9; italics ours).

Decades later, this remains the predominant definition in bullying research, with Olweus recently reiterating its key components (Olweus, 2013). This definition has provided the foundation for the Olweus Bullying Victimization Questionnaire, which has been used to measure bullying among hundreds of thousands of adolescents across the world (Currie et al., 2012). It has also inspired numerous other bullying measures (e.g., Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012; Craig & Pepler, 1997; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). There are two key differences that emerge between this definition and the one from Merriam-Webster: the idea of intentionality and the repetitive nature of the behavior. In themselves, these discrepancies may be problematic to the extent that they can blur the criteria used implicitly by respondents completing self-report bullying questionnaires (Sawyer, Bradshaw, & O’Brennan, 2008; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). However, these discrepancies may in fact reflect deeper underlying uncertainty about the conceptualization and measurement of bullying (Liu & Graves, 2011). Dozens of bullying researchers attending a recent Society for Research on Child Development symposium titled, “40 Years of Bullying Research: What We Know,” came to a general consensus that there is still no adequate definition of bullying (Hymel, Swearer, McDougall, Espelage, & Bradshaw, 2013, April). This is an alarming and surprising statement given the amount of research generated on bullying over the last two decades (Berger, 2007). If we do not yet have an adequate and uniformly applied definition of bullying, can we properly move forward in understanding and preventing the phenomenon (Aalsma & Brown, 2008; Hanish et al., 2013; Nansel & Overpeck, 2003; Pepler & Craig, 2009)?

One challenge has been reconciling emerging research with the traditional definition of bullying. For example, although the requirement that bullying must be repeated frequently has long been incorporated into both theoretical definitions and assessment measures (Berger, 2007; Crothers & Levinson, 2004), recent advances in research raise the question of whether it is a necessary feature of bullying. Investigators have recently noted that a single incident of cyber-bullying may be very harmful to the victim, given that the posting of embarrassing or hurtful material to the Internet may be accessed by many people for a long period of time (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Indeed, Olweus (2013) himself views this issue as needing clarification and requiring further research.

Confusion between public and academic definitions and confusion among academics suggest that it would be beneficial to re-examine the general definition of bullying, by integrating recent theory and empirical data (Barboza et al., 2009; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, 2012a, 2012b). We therefore propose the following new theoretical definition of bullying: *Bullying is aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance.* While we draw primarily upon adolescent research, our definition is intended to be equally applicable to bullying in both younger children and in adults. In the present paper, we examine empirical and theoretical support for the three major components of the proposed definition: (i) goal-directedness, (ii)

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