Staff and prisoner perceptions of physical and social environmental factors thought to be supportive of bullying: The role of bullying and fear of bullying

Matthew D. Allison [a], Jane L. Ireland [b,c],*

[a] School of Psychology Department, HMP Leeds, UK
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, UK
[c] Psychological Services, Ashworth High Secure Hospital, Mersey Care NHS Trust, UK

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The current study explored the relationship between social and physical environmental factors supportive of bullying, levels of bullying and fear of bullying. Participants were 261 adult male prisoners. All completed the *Direct and Indirect Prisoner Checklist-Scaled Version Revised* (DIPC-SCALED-r ©Ireland, 2007), the *Prison Environment Scale* (PES ©Allison, 2007), and a *Brief Measure of Fear of Bullying Scale* (BMFBS). The PES was explored initially using 100 male prisoners randomly selected from the main sample and 100 prison officers. It was predicted that increased bullying would be associated with increased evidence of environmental factors supportive of bullying; that increased levels of fear of bullying would be associated with increased evidence of environmental factors supportive of bullying; and that actual experience of bullying would represent better predictors of fear levels than the presence of environmental factors supportive of bullying. Those perceiving greater levels of environmental factors reported more fear of bullying and more behaviours indicative of bullying (perpetration and victimisation), with this holding for indirect and direct behaviours indicative of bullying. Bullying behaviours (direct perpetration and indirect victimisation) predicted fear of bullying more than the presence of environmental factors. The environmental factor of rules, regulations and security were found to predict bullying perpetration.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

A consensus with regards to the definition of bullying does not exist. Definitions variably make reference to frequencies of behaviour, power imbalances, issues of intent, victim reactions, fear of future aggression and the environment in which bullying occurs (Ireland, 2005). Bullying is more recently considered to represent simply a broad term to describe a wide range of acts of aggression that occur within groups. Recent research suggests sizeable estimates of bullying behaviours, with Ireland and Ireland (2008) reporting that 60% of men and women adult prisoners reported behaviour indicative of bullying others, with 80% reporting behaviour indicative of being victimised within a one month period. Furthermore 20% of prisoners indicated 'chronic' levels of perpetration/victimisation, i.e. extreme frequencies of bullying and /or victimisation. Ireland and Power (in press) have also reported that *fear* of bullying is common among prisoners, irrespective of whether they were involved in bullying behaviour or not. *Fear* of bullying was found to have more significant (negative) health correlates than actual experience.

Current opinion as to why bullying occurs has shifted from studying aspects of the individual to incorporate aspects of the environment. This shift reflects a move away from individual psychopathological under-standings of bullying to one where the environment is thought to interact with the individual to promote and reinforce bullying. This is seen in studies of employees in work environments (Jennifer, Cowie & Anaiadou, 2003), schools (Reis, Trockel & Mulhall, 2007) and prisons (Ireland 2002). For example with regards to prisoners, over-crowding and increased turnover in the numbers of prisoners is thought to promote bullying through relationships and hierarchies being constant-ly in transition (Ireland, 2005).

How aspects of the environment affect levels of *fear* is well researched in community settings in relation to the concept of 'fear of crime'. For example, Van der Wurff, van Staalduinen and Stringer (1989) report that the extent to which a place lends itself to criminal activities impacts upon an individuals' fear of crime. However, how the prison environment impacts on prisoner's levels of fear of bullying is less well researched or understood. Within the *Applied Fear Response Model*, a model that outlines how fear influences prisoner's reactions in anticipation of and as a result of bullying, Ireland (2005) states that fear of bullying can exist without prior victimisation. Arguably then fear could arise as a result of environmental factors.

Specific factors that exist within the prison environment linked to bullying are highlighted in the *Interactional Model of Prison Bullying* (Ireland, 2005). This model makes the distinction between physical

* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK. Tel.: +44 1772 201201.
E-mail address: JLIreland1@uclan.ac.uk (J.L. Ireland).

and social environmental factors. Physical environmental factors include material goods, population, staff supervision and lack of stimulation (Ireland, 2005). With regards to each:

Material goods

Material goods in prison are limited, arguably becoming a form of currency (Brookes, Cooper, Trivette & Wilmot, 1994), and thus desirable (Ireland, 2005). The greater the material deprivation the greater the reward for exploitation through bullying (Feld, 1981). A link between material goods and fear of bullying in prison, however, has yet to be established. Research from community studies linking material goods and fear of crime is contradictory. Van der Wurff, Stringer and Timmer (1986) report a positive relationship between an objects' desirability and fear of victimisation, whereas Foster (1995) found that aggression associated with hidden economies though was accepted and thus was not a source of fear. Hidden economies are economies that elude official observation.

Bio-psychosocial theories (Gilbert, 1994) and *Decision Theories* (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) of aggression hold that economic structures based on competition to control resources can lead to predatory behaviour and aggression. This is particularly pertinent to prison settings where there are restrictions on material goods. *Blocked Opportunity theory* (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) would also add that aggression arises when legitimate means to obtain goals are blocked. It could be expected where rules governing allocation are not clear, or where mechanisms dispensing material goods are inconsistent, aggression and bullying may result.

Population

A number of theories suggest that increased population density is related to increased levels of bullying among prisoners (Ekland-Olson, 1986; Megargee, 1976, 1977), particularly *spatial density* (i.e. physical living space for prisoners) and *social densities* (number of prisoners encountered over time). The empirical evidence for a link between population and aggression is, however, contradictory. Megargee (1977), Nacci, Teitelbaum and Prather (1977) and Jan (1980) found significant positive relationships between population variables and rates of prison misconduct. However, these studies included other variables in addition to including aggression. Conversely, Walters (1998) found an inverse relationship; Ekland-Olson (1986) found aggression to be concentrated in high security units and to be episodic; and Farrington and Nuttall (1980) found no relationship.

Although a link between population levels and levels of fear is unclear, it is possible to speculate on the existence of a relationship. The *Social Interaction Demand Model* (Cox, Paulus & McCain, 1984) describing aggression in prisons, states that crowding induces raised levels of fear through the strains of increased social interaction. Community studies (e.g. Albanesi, 2003), note that the effectiveness of social ties in maintaining a sense of safety are mediated by the perception of community and neighbourhood relations. This is a similar finding to Edgar, O'Donnell and Martin (2003) who, among prisoners, reported that familiarity with people can help engender feelings of safety.

Staff supervision

Increased population densities also arguably impact on the effectiveness of staff supervision. *External Control Theories* of aggression (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994) emphasise the deterrent affect of sanctions through punishment. Where population density is high the ability to detect bullying reduces, so the deterrent effect of sanctions lessens, therefore increasing the possibility of bullying. Furthermore, *Routine Activity Theory* (Clarke & Felson, 1993) states that crime (arguably a concept closely related to bullying if conceptualised as a form of antisocial behaviour), is more likely to occur where routine activities exist particularly if this is unsupervised. Weizmann-Henelius and

Suutala (2000), Ekland-Olson (1986) and McGurk and McDougall (1991) have all noted this empirically. Toch (1978) also notes that the predictability of supervision patterns can promote opportunities for violence.

Supervision patterns, however, may also be linked to levels of fear of bullying. *Criminalisable Space* (Van der Wurff et al., 1986) refers to environments that provide opportunities to commit crime. These can evoke fear as well as the possibility of aggression. For example, Bottoms (1999) notes that showers were regarded by prisoners as unsafe locations due to the level of undetected attacks. Additionally, Goodey (2005) notes that activities undertaken routinely by people can increase 'victim proneness'. Conversely, however, Bottoms (1999) notes that routines within prison also provide a sense of stability and order and through this safety. Thus the relationship between supervision and aggression is unlikely to be a straightforward one (Ireland 2005).

Lack of stimulation

A number of studies indicate a link between a lack of stimulation in the form of activities and social contact, and both aggression and bullying within secure settings (Shepherd & Lavender, 1999; Bidna, 1975 & McGurk & McDougall, 1991). Steinke (1991) and Huebner (2003) note that aggression is less likely to occur when prisoners are engaged in structured activities. To the contrary, Daffern, Mayer and Martin (2004) found no such link in secure psychiatric patients.

A factor impacting upon the decision to aggress within *Decision Theory* are the attitudes people hold towards risk (Tedeschi & Felson 1994); the more willing someone is to take risks the more likely they are to aggress. Risk taking is more likely when faced with the possibility of losses than when faced with opportunities for gain. If a prisoner has nothing lose, for example an activity or employment, they may be at greater risk of bullying (Ireland, 2005). This has been referred to as the *Effect/Danger Principal* (Björkqvist, 1994) a concept which has been applied to prison bullying (Ireland, 2002) to describe how the personal cost of using aggression is likely to be weighed against its effect.

Pertinent social environmental factors such as organisational structure, prisoner subculture, prisoner attitudes towards bullying and power and dominance structures are also referred to in the *Interactional Model of Prison Bullying* (Ireland, 2005). The pertinent key elements are outlined here:

Organisational structure

Prisons are authoritarian and hierarchical in structure, which in combination with other aspects of the environment can promote bullying (Ireland, 2000). *Frustration-aggression* hypotheses of aggression (Berkowitz, 1993) assert that thwarted goal attainment leads to the formation of negative affect that can manifest as aggression. When a third party, other than the source of the thwarting is the victim of the aggression, this can be seen as displaced aggression. It is suggested that where the organisational culture is hierarchical, authoritarian and disciplinarian in nature displaced aggression can exist as a reaction to the inflexibility within such structures (Ireland, 2002). This has been noted empirically in forensic patients (Sheridan, Henrion, Robinson & Baxter, 1990; Shepherd & Lavender, 1999) and prisoners (Feld, 1981).

Gilbert (1994), by way of bio-psychosocial theories of aggression, highlights that organisational structure may be linked to aggression through authoritarian leadership styles influencing the surrounding culture. This is similar to the assertion by Bottoms (1999) that the ethos and management style with which a prison operates can promote a feeling of security.

Prisoner subculture

Tittle (1969), McGurk and McDougall (1991) and Feld (1981) report on the existence of an informal normative system among