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Bullying in different contexts: Commonalities, differences and the role of theory

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ABSTRACT

Research on bullying has grown very rapidly in the last two decades, initially in schools but also in a variety of other settings and relationships; and there has been relatively little communication between the different groups of researchers. We describe the nature of bullying in schools, between siblings, in children's residential care homes, in prisons, and in the workplace. Commonalities and differences in the phenomenon, and the ways in which it is exhibited and experienced are explored. The role of individual and organizational factors in the development and maintenance of these behaviors across contexts is compared. We then examine a number of theoretical approaches which have been suggested as relevant to our understanding of bullying. Integrative approaches from different research traditions are proposed which view these behaviors as being influenced by a combination of situational and individual factors.

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1. Introduction

Bullying has been a focus of research for over 20 years. There has been debate over the definition of the term "bullying", but most researchers agree that it is an act that is intended to harm, that takes place repeatedly, and with an imbalance of power between the aggressor and target (Farrington, 1993). This is put succinctly by Smith and Sharp (1994, p. 2) and Rigby (2002, p. 74) as a "systematic abuse of power". However, Olweus (1993) acknowledges that "a single instance of … serious harassment can be regarded as bullying under certain circumstances" (p. 9). We suggest that these "certain circumstances" center on how long after the abusive event the abused person continues to feel coerced, degraded, humiliated, threatened, intimidated, or frightened. Therefore, we take bullying to include physical abuse (e.g., hitting, kicking or punching), verbal abuse (e.g., threatening, mocking, name-calling, or spreading malicious rumors), and social isolation or exclusion (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988) in which a person is deliberately ignored.

Much research on bullying has focused on bullying in schools, especially bullying between pupils (Smith et al., 1999). However, the term "bullying" has been applied to research in other settings and relationships and behaviors which meet the definition of "bullying" given above can be described in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Previous reviews have focused on bullying in one particular setting. Here, we review the literature regarding the nature, extent, characteristics, and impact of bullying in schools, between siblings, in children's homes, in prisons, and in the workplace. We examine similarities and differences in bullying within these different contexts; and consider relevant theoretical approaches which may prove helpful in understanding, and ultimately combating, bullying behaviors.

2. School bullying

Bullying in school has become a topic of international concern over the last 20 years. Starting with research in Scandinavia, Japan, and the United Kingdom (U.K.), there is now active research in most European countries, in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (U.S.) (Smith et al., 1999).

2.1. Nature and extent

Main types are physical and verbal bullying, indirect and relational bullying (such as spreading nasty rumors), and social exclusion. Recent research has highlighted cyberbullying via mobile 'phones and the Internet' (Smith et al., 2008). So-called "bias bullying" refers to bullying because of some group (rather than individual) characteristic of the recipient.

Large-scale surveys have used questionnaires (e.g., Arora's, 1994 "Life in School Checklist" questionnaire and Olweus's 1994 anonymous self-report questionnaire) while smaller-scale studies can use interviews and peer nominations. A development of the latter (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996) allows differentiation of participant roles, such as ringleader bully, follower, reinforcer, outsider, and defender, as well as victim. Studies with young children suggest that aggressor and defender roles can be recognized by 4–5 years, although few children are continually targeted so early; peer-aggression is more randomly distributed, but becomes focused on certain children later, for example those at risk in various ways (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003). Two studies have pioneered observations in playgrounds (Boulton, 1995; Pepler, Craig, & Roberts, 1998).

Prevalence figures vary greatly, influenced by: what time span is being asked about (e.g., last month, last term, last year, ever at school); what frequency is regarded as bullying (e.g., once/twice a term; once a month, once a week or more); what definition is used (e.g., whether it includes indirect as well as direct forms). However, it is clear that victims of bullying are a substantial minority (maybe around 5–20% of pupils), and bullies (who take part in bullying others) are usually a smaller minority (maybe around 2–20%) (see Smith et al., 1999). Some pupils are both bullies and victims, or bully/victims; their prevalence varies greatly according to methodology and criteria, but they are likely to be especially at risk (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000).

2.2. Characteristics

In school, the majority of bullying takes place in the playground, classroom, or corridors. Self-reports of being bullied decline over the 8 to 16 year period; self-reports of bullying others do not. There tends to be some shift with age away from physical bullying and toward indirect and relational bullying. Boys are more numerous in the bully category, but the sexes are more equal in being bullied. Boys practice/experience more physical bullying, girls more indirect and relational bullying (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 1999).

2.3. School factors

There are large school variations in the prevalence of bullying, but factors such as size of school, class size or rural versus big city setting are usually not related to this. However, the school ethos, attitudes of teachers in bullying situations, and the degree of supervision of free activities appear to be of major significance, as is the existence of an effective school policy (Galloway & Roland, 2004).

2.4. Individual risk factors

Risk factors for being bullied include having few friends, especially friends who can be trusted or who are not themselves of low status; sociometric rejection (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997); and coming from over-protective families (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998). Another risk factor is having a disability or special educational needs (e.g.,