

What does Psychology tell us (and not tell us) about bullying?

Introduction

Psychological research indicates that up to 1 in 4 children may be involved in bullying; as the bully, victim, or both, illustrated in table 1. Whilst rates vary due to contextual factors such as culture (Kanetsuna, 2016) and gender (Scheithauer *et al.*, 2006, Wang *et al.*, 2012), the suggestion that bullying could be this prevalent indicates a genuine cause for concern. Seminal and current research will be presented and evaluated to aid Educational Practitioners in gaining insight into the nature of bullying, and how this relates to prevention and intervention strategies. To systematically examine psychological factors relating to bullying, a definition first needs to be offered and types of bullying identified. Following this, competing socio-psychological models will be presented to discern the different roles involved in bullying. Finally, wider implications from social psychological research and the long-term effects will be discussed.

Table 1. Weighted Percentage of Students Reporting Bullying Others During the Current Term*				
Sample	Reported Bullying, % (95% CI)			
	None	Once or Twice	Sometimes	Weekly
Total	55.7 (53.6-57.8)	25.0 (23.9-26.1)	10.6 (9.5-11.6)	8.8 (7.9-9.6)
By sex				
Males	47.1 (44.8-49.4)	27.0 (25.5-28.5)	13.0 (11.9-14.1)	12.9 (11.5-14.3)
Females	63.2 (60.5-65.8)	23.2 (21.8-24.6)	8.5 (7.0-9.9)	5.2 (4.4-6.0)
By grade				
6th	54.3 (50.0-58.7)	26.9 (23.8-29.9)	8.4 (6.7-10.2)	10.4 (8.2-12.6)
7th	53.5 (49.8-57.2)	26.9 (24.1-29.8)	9.8 (8.0-11.5)	9.8 (8.0-11.5)
8th	50.5 (47.3-53.7)	25.4 (22.9-28.0)	14.3 (11.8-16.8)	9.8 (8.2-11.4)
9th	56.4 (53.2-59.5)	25.0 (22.9-27.1)	11.6 (9.1-14.2)	7.0 (6.0-8.0)
10th	64.0 (60.7-67.4)	20.4 (18.3-22.5)	8.6 (7.3-9.9)	6.9 (5.8-8.1)
By race				
White	54.8 (52.2-57.4)	26.2 (24.7-27.7)	10.5 (9.0-12.0)	8.5 (7.4-9.5)
Black	59.8 (56.2-63.5)	21.7 (19.0-24.4)	10.2 (8.1-12.2)	8.3 (6.5-10.0)
Hispanic	53.2 (50.5-55.9)	24.4 (21.9-26.9)	12.0 (10.4-13.5)	10.4 (8.4-12.4)

*CI indicates confidence interval.

Table 1 Total involved in bullying (Male and female) at least once at 25% (Nansen et al., 2001)

Definitions of Bullying

Bullying is defined as an aggressive act (Olweus, 1973) inflicted on an individual by “one or more other persons” (Olweus, 2003, p. 98). Expanding on this, the difference between different forms of negative actions (Olweus, 2003, emphasis in original) are relayed in Table 1. The key difference between bullying and harassment compared to related terms is that it is systematised as being repeated over a period (Smith, 2014). Whilst criteria used is variable between studies conducted into the topic of bullying (Kanetsuna, 2016), it can be argued that repetition of the acts of negative actions (Olweus, 2003, emphasis in original) is commonplace within research conducted within psychology, even across cultures (Kanetsuna, 2016).

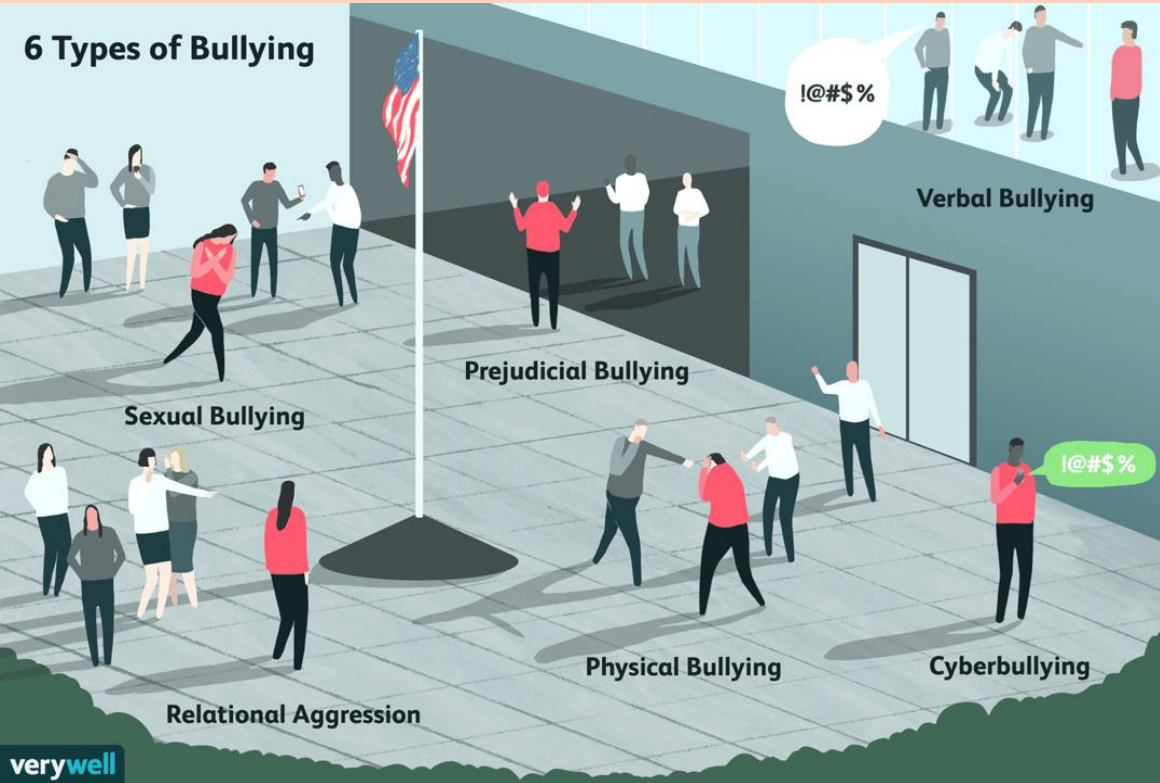
Term/criteria	Cause harm	Intent	Repeated	Power imbalance	Only physical	Only person to person	Only if unjust
Aggression	x	x				x	
Bullying	x	x	x	x		x	x
Harassment	x	x	x	x		x	x
Intimidation	x	x		x		x	
Abuse	x			x		x	x
Violence	x				x		

Table 2 Bullying and related terms against criteria (Smith, 2014)

Types of Bullying

As with definitions of what constitutes bullying, there is some discrepancy of precisely what various forms bullying takes. Some commonly suggested instances of bullying fall into the categories of physical bullying, verbal bullying, and social bullying as non exclusionary forms; relational bullying and social bullying e.g. exclusion from groups and/or rumour spreading (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995, Olweus, 1993, cited in Wang, Lannotti, & Luk, 2012). Furthermore, there is a suggested co-occurrence (pupils experience more than one form of bullying at a time) found within a study conducted by Wang *et al.* (2010). A visualisation of various forms of bullying have been illustrated in figure 1. Educational Practitioners may recognise some of these from dealing with bullying incidents within the UK mainstream education system. By being more acutely aware of exactly what form the bullying has taken, or may take in future incidents, it is hoped it will help Educational Practitioners now, or in the future. Thus, the key point is that psychology can systematically study and observe bullying within schools to help inform Educational Practitioners and offer potential prevention and intervention and strategies, backed-up by evidence from studies using different methodological procedures.

Figure 1 Different types of bullying visualised (Gordon, 2019)



Cyber-Bullying

More recently, a significant focus has been given to cyber-bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Chen, Ho, & Lwin, 2017; Reed *et al.*, 2016;). It has been sectioned separately, though this is not to state it is unequivocally different. Rather it has been sectioned separately to bring light to the fact that there is debate about whether or not it is to be considered separately from more 'traditional' forms of bullying e.g. face-to-face in the school playground (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Interestingly, it does appear in some regards to be potentially be different as “most self-report studies of being bullied in traditional ways find a decrease with age after 11 years through to school leaving age” (Smith, Madsen, & Moody, 1999, cited in Slonje & Smith, 2008, p. 148). As Slonje & Smith (2008) continue, it may not be the case with cyber-bullying. Likewise, 'traditional' bullying over all (for bully and victims) is more likely to be male (Scheithauer *et al.*, 2006) yet Slonje & Smith (2008) indicate this may potentially be different too, though it is currently a topic of study yet to be confirmed with any degree of certainty; in their own study it seemed to be non-significant, though there was variation.

Bullies, Victims, & Bully-Victims

Bullying needs both a bully and a victim, obviously, and early research tended to focus on this dichotomy treating them as exclusive categories (Cook *et al.*, 2010). As Cook *et al.* (2010) point out in their meta-analytic investigation: “there were fewer than 190 peer-reviewed articles published on bullying during the 20-year span from 1980 to 2000, there have been well over 600 articles published on this topic from 2000 to the present time”. One might argue a possible reason for this is that there was limited scope and methodological variance to offer a conceptual frame-work for anything more complex than bully-victim dichotomies during early research into this topic of psychological understanding. Furthermore, from studies in psychology, the picture painted is that there is a greater nuance; children tend to fall somewhere along the continuum of the bully-victim (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Olweus, 1994; Swearer *et al.*, 2001, cited in Cook *et al.*, 2010).

Number of Study Independent Effect Sizes (Number of Participants) Derived for Each Predictor by Bully Status Group				
Predictor	Bully status			Row total
	Bully	Bully victim	Victim	
Individual				
Gender	65 (89,450)	8 (6,741)	66 (87,450)	139
Age	18 (19,010)	2 (470)	19 (20,282)	39
Externalizing	46 (55,987)	15 (18,637)	51 (62,468)	112
Internalizing	40 (40,436)	10 (9,269)	52 (53,078)	102
Self-related cognitions	29 (23,562)	4 (1,150)	29 (27,279)	62
Other-related cognitions	16 (13,912)	1 (466)	19 (10,649)	27
Social problem solving	20 (13,027)	4 (2,855)	21 (12,555)	45
Social competence	21 (27,952)	4 (3,588)	25 (25,505)	50
Academic performance	15 (13,433)	1 (201)	16 (52,265)	32
Contextual				
Family/home environment	28 (28,765)	5 (3,316)	22 (31,875)	55
School climate	18 (25,051)	2 (1,760)	19 (25,695)	39
Community factors	9 (10,025)	1 (198)	5 (8,303)	15
Peer status	20 (12,455)	5 (3,536)	27 (20,588)	52
Peer influence	13 (10,897)	2 (935)	8 (12,496)	23
Column total	319	58	333	792*

*Grand total for the number of effect sizes analyzed across studies and across bully status categories.

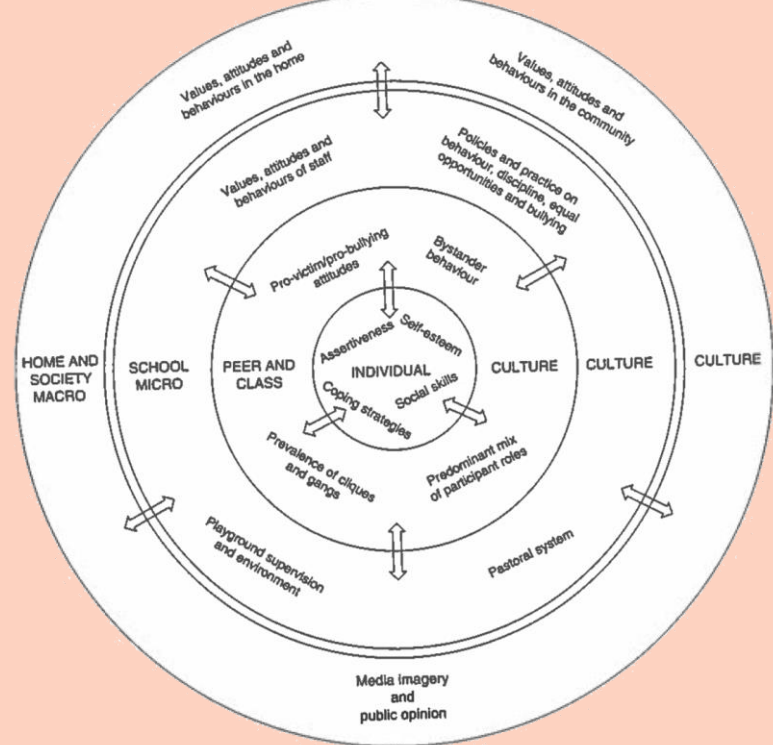
Table 3 Predictors for bully status (Cook et al., 2010)

Table 3 shows in full the range of psychological predictors for each of the three categories. The important information is that there are “three predictors for the bully group (externalizing, other-related cognitions, and negative peer influence), two for the victim group (internalizing and peer status), and seven for the bully-victim group (externalizing, social competence, self-related cognitions, academic performance, school climate, peer status, and negative peer influence)” (Cook *et al.*, 2010, p. 76). Thus, from the psychological studies, one could theoretically predict with fair probability the psychological signs that may indicate a person's role in bullying that is “noticeable in day-to-day life” (Cohen 1992, cited in Cook *et al.*, 2010, p. 76). This would quite strongly suggest it is useful in both prevention and intervention that could be one such possible understanding to be adopted by Educational Practitioners in mainstream UK education.

A Complex Social Phenomenon

There are alternative theories to bullying within the literature. Bullying is, from the evidence given so far, implied to be a psychological issue based (mostly) around individuals or small groups acting in social situations. However, one could argue that it is much more complex than the framework given in the previous section. An illustration is given in figure 2.

Figure 2 Bullying represented as a complex social phenomenon within a wider social ecological setting (Sharp, 1999, cited in Cline, Gulliford, & Birch, 2015)



This concept is, arguably, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology of human development theory applied to bullying. The relevant part(s) to bullying is that there is the self: nestled within the microsystem (known-people and settings e.g. family in the household); resting within the mesosystems (e.g. a child going from their household to the setting of the school); inside an exosystem (which does not involve the developing person directly e.g. child's parental workplace); which resides within the greater macrosystem (i.e. a culture of a country, or ideologies prevalent there, or belief systems etc.) (Bronfenbrenner 1981, pp. 22-26). Therefore, within this complex system, psychological understanding of a child's development has an aspect of the wider biological implications, and of the wider social considerations (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Thus, when developing potential prevention and intervention strategies, there is an argument to be made to consider the wider social aspects of bullying. For educational practitioners, this might include contacting parents to investigate the home-life of children. There may be an indication that the problem has its start at home e.g., children from aggressive households have been suggested more likely to exhibit aggressive and bullying behaviour (Bifulco *et al.*, 2014).

Effects of Bullying

Bullying is defined as an aggressive act (Olweus, 1973) inflicted on an individual by “one or more other persons” (Olweus, 2003, p. 98). Expanding on this, the difference between different forms of negative actions (Olweus, 2003, emphasis in original) are relayed in Table 1. The key difference between bullying and harassment compared to related terms is that it is systematised as being repeated over a period (Smith, 2014). Whilst criteria used is variable between studies conducted into the topic of bullying (Kanetsuna, 2016), it can be argued that repetition of the acts of negative actions (Olweus, 2003, emphasis in original) is commonplace within research conducted within psychology, even across cultures (Kanetsuna, 2016).

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