

Integrating multi-disciplinary social science theories and perspectives to understand school bullying and victimisation

Jun Sung Hong, Dorothy L. Espelage, Simon C. Hunter, Paula Allen-Meares

School bullying is a serious social problem, which has received widespread public, media, and research attention over the years. The first study of bullying was published in 1969 by a school physician named P. P. Heinemann (Olweus, 1999), which was subsequently followed by extensive empirical inquiry since the 1970s in Scandinavia led by Dan Olweus (Vaillancourt *et al.*, 2008). In subsequent decades, social scientists have developed a rich theoretical and empirical body of knowledge with regards to children and adolescents' experiences in bullying. Scholars conceptualise bullying as a sub-category of aggression (Smith *et al.*, 2002), characterised as being purposeful, including an imbalance of power, and being repetitive (Hunter, Boyle & Warden, 2007; Smith, 2014).

Bullying has for the most part been explored from a psychological perspective, providing insights into proximal risk factors, such as individual traits and behaviours. However, bullying is a complex, multifaceted problem, and consideration of theoretical frameworks from outside psychology is necessary to fully explain why certain individuals (or groups of individuals) are involved in bullying. Scholars have therefore come to realise the importance of integrating psychological theories with social environmental perspectives (sociological, anthropological, political-economic; Lawson & King, 2012). This has the potential to broaden perspectives on the etiology and outcomes of bullying, introduce innovative methodologies, and raise important questions about new approaches to prevention and intervention (Holt *et al.*, 2016).

This chapter will provide an overview of multiple social science theories and perspectives in explaining bullying. It is divided by theories and perspectives represented by four major branches of social science: Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and Political-Economics.

Psychological perspectives

Psychology, as a discipline, largely attributes the etiology of violence and aggression to individual pathology or family dysfunction (King, 2012). In addition, some psychologists attempt to explain how mental processes might impact an individual's propensity for violent behaviour (Kumpulinen, 2008). Others are interested in how individual traits might interact with the social environment to produce violent behaviour (Espelage, Holt & Henkel, 2003). Theories and frameworks that underpin psychological perspectives are attachment theory, social learning theory, social-ecological framework, and theory of stress and coping.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory is a widely accepted developmental theory that explains the nature of an affectual bond between child and primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1958). More specifically, attachment theory provides a framework for understanding the influence of socio-emotional relationships on cognitive-affective structures of an individual child's cognitive-affective structures for constructing views of the self, world, and others (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). A child's attachment behaviours include seeking contact with the primary caregivers, which primarily develop over the course of the first eighteen months. Early attachment patterns in the

home have been shown to influence a child's future behaviour (Thompson, 2000), and attachment theory provides an important link between relations with parents and peers (Bowlby, 1988). Direct (e.g., Kokkinos, 2007; Walden & Beran, 2010) and indirect (Eliot & Cornell, 2009) association between lower quality parent-child attachment and bullying and victimisation have been established in a number of study findings. Moreover, a positive association between insecure attachment with caregivers and bullying and victimisation has also been reported (Eliot & Cornell, 2009; Monks, Smith & Swettenham, 2005; Walden & Beran, 2010). Monks and colleagues' (2005) findings revealed that bullies appeared to have insecure attachments with their mothers, while victims tended to have a secure attachment. Walden and Beran (2010) also found that youth with a high-quality attachment with their caregivers were unlike to bully others and be victimised by their peers.

Social Learning Theory

One possible explanation for the development of bullying comes from social learning theory, suggesting that "*most human behaviour is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action*" (Bandura, 1977, p. 22). In relation to bullying, youth who are exposed to violent behaviours within their family and/or peer contexts may learn and accept such behaviour as an appropriate method of dealing with conflict or reaching a desired goal (Akers, 2011). To date, studies have consistently found that exposure to aggressive behaviour in a child's social context is significantly related to bullying (Knous-Westfall, Ehrensaft, MacDonell & Cohen, 2012).

Social-ecological framework

The social-ecological model of human development focuses on understanding how individual characteristics of children interact with environmental contexts or systems to promote or prevent bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). An ecological explanation of bullying suggests that youth become involved in bullying as perpetrators, victims, perpetrator-victims, or bystanders as a result of complex interactions between their own individual characteristics and their families, schools, peers, and society. Characteristics, such as age, sex, and race/ethnicity are frequently examined predictors of bullying. Individual characteristics that appear to place children at risk for bullying includes sex (Espelage *et al.*, 2013), race/ethnicity (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2001), health status (e.g., overweight, disability, depression; Cook *et al.*, 2010), and sexual orientation (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett & Koenig, 2008). Within the family context, bullies tend to have parents who do not supervise them closely or do not provide adequate social supports (Lereya, Samara & Wolke, 2013). In some families, parents may encourage the use of violence to resolve conflicts and some bullies report exposure to family violence (Espelage, Low *et al.*, 2013). Further, victims often come from families with histories of abuse or inconsistent parenting (Lereya *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, when youth have warm relations with parents, they are less likely at risk of being victimised (Bowes *et al.*, 2010).

In terms of peer context, bullying rarely takes place in isolated dyadic interactions, but instead often occurs within peer groups (Salmivalli, 2010). Bullies socialise their friends to engage in similar behaviour (Espelage, Holt & Henkel, 2003). In a meta-analysis, Cook and

colleagues (2010) found that youth in middle school who bullied others had greater social status, whereas younger children who bullied were socially rejected. Further, students may perpetuate bullying by actively joining in or passively accepting the bullying behaviours. Alternatively, students can intervene to stop bullying or defend the victim (Espelage, Green & Polanin, 2012).

Regarding school context, youth spend many hours a day in school and schools can be protective spaces or they can promote bullying. Put simply, students' perceptions of their school environment as positive and supportive, or negative and unsupportive shape their behaviours. School environment is a broad term that encompasses multiple features of school climate or "culture" (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne & Gottfredson, 2005). School climate reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relations, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organisational structures (National School Climate Council, 2007). In a study of 40 countries, Harel-Fisch and colleagues (2011) found that as negative school perceptions reported by students increased, so did their involvement in bullying.

Theory of stress and coping

Transactional theories of stress and coping focus on explaining the variation in individual outcomes when individuals appear to experience very similar stressors. The focus is on appraisals (how a situation is interpreted) and coping behaviours (the strategies used to deal with the situation) (Lazarus, 1999; Raskauskas & Huynh, 2015). Key appraisals that have attracted empirical interest have been control, threat, and perceived social support. Greater perceived control over episodes of bullying appears to be associated with lower levels of adjustment reported by bullied children and may mediate the effect of victimisation upon adjustment

(Catterson & Hunter, 2010; Hunter *et al*, 2010; Hunter, Mora-Merchán & Ortega, 2004).

Appraisals of threat are positively associated with victims' psychosocial maladjustment and may also mediate the effect of non-discriminatory bullying on adjustment (Catterson & Hunter, 2010; Hunter *et al.*, 2004, 2010). Finally, perceived social support has been shown to moderate the relationship between bullying and suicidal ideation in adolescence (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010).

This may not be the case when examining symptoms of depression and anxiety (Chen, Cheung & Cheung, 2008; Pouwelse, Bolman, Lodewijkx & Spaa, 2011) where instead perceived social support may act as a mediator (Chen & Wei, 2013; Pouselse *et al.*, 2011). Other appraisals, such as self-efficacy and self-blame, have also been considered as moderators or mediators of the relationship between bullying and adjustment (e.g., Barchia & Bussey, 2010; Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

As well as having direct effects on wellbeing, appraisals are also considered to be proximal determinants of coping responses (Lazarus, 1999). For example, greater perceived control is associated with both assertive (e.g., standing up to bullies) and aggressive (e.g., hitting back) coping strategies, while threat is associated with aggression and avoidance (e.g., skipping school; Hunter, Boyle & Warden, 2006; Terranova, 2009).

Sociological perspectives

The unique perspective of sociology is the perception of violence as a function of social structure rather than individual pathology (Lawson, 2012). Sociologists have contributed much to our knowledge of violence, which is regarded as social processes and institutions (Walby, 2012).

From a sociological standpoint, bullying arises not only from microsystem level factors, but also

macrosystem level factors, which are the focus of many sociological theories (Jeralds, 2011). According to Pascoe (2013), the sociology of bullying indicates that aggressive interchanges between and among adolescents function as interactional reproductions of structural inequalities that are inherent in our society. There are overarching sociological theories and perspectives on bullying and victimisation, which seek to describe bullying as a function of social structures and systems (Lawson, 2012). Sociological theories include general strain theory, social control theory, routine activity theory, and gender role socialisation theory.

General Strain Theory

General strain theory contends that adolescents who experience strain may feel angry or frustrated and, as a result, they are at an elevated risk of criminal or deviant behaviour (Agnew, 1992). In other words, peer victimised youth identify abusive peer relations as a strain, which is more likely to cause offending behaviours (Agnew, 2006). As a result, bullying as a source of strain has been identified in several studies (Cullen *et al*, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Wallace, Patchin & May, 2005). On the contrary, Agnew (2001) argued that bullying is also consequential because it satisfies four conditions that characterise consequential strains: (1) it is perceived as being unjust because bullying will violate basic norms of justice; (2) bullying is perceived as high in magnitude (as peer relations are critical to adolescents); (3) bullying is not linked to conventional social control because it will often occur away from adult authority; and (4) bullying exposes the strained individual (i.e., bullies) to others (Hay, Meldrum & Mann, 2010). In sum, bullying and victimisation are outcomes of pressures created by negative social relationships or negative experiences (Jang, Song & Kim, 2014), which has been supported by a

large body of empirical research findings (Hay, Medrum & Mann, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2011). One study found that youth who reported experiencing strain are at an elevated risk of participating in both face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011).

Social Control Theory

Hirschi's (1969) social control theory is based on linking individuals and conventional social institutions to understand adolescents' delinquent behaviour. The premise of social control theory is that deviant and delinquent behaviours are likely to develop when an individual has weak bonds to society and social institutions (Hirschi, 1969). Additionally, bullying may emerge when an adolescent's bonds or ties to social institutions (i.e., school, family, community) are diminished, making the adolescent more susceptible to such behaviour (Pittaro, 2007). In contrast, healthy bonds with parents, teachers, and schools are hypothesised to moderate whether or not adolescents will engage in bullying. Four components of social control have been proposed to explain why some children and adolescents are likely to engage in bullying: (a) emotional attachment to parents, peers, and conventional institutions; (b) commitment to long-term educational, occupational, or other conventional goals; (c) involvement in conventional activities (e.g., homework, hobbies); and (d) belief in social rules and laws (Hirschi, 1969). Any of these four components of social control can independently inhibit bullying; however, the combined effect of these components on bullying is greater than the sum of their individual effects (Peguero *et al.*, 2011). Extant research supports Hirschi's (1969) proposition. Empirical findings have demonstrated that emotional attachment to primary caregivers, bonding to school

and teachers, commitment to school, and involvement in conventional extracurricular activities protects students from victimisation or engagement in bullying (Cunningham, 2007; O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010; Peguero, 2008).

Routine Activity Theory

Routine Activity Theory (RAT) emerged as a key theoretical approach in the field of criminology in the late 1970s (Wikstrom, 2009). Cohen and Felson (1979) advocated for exploring social interactions in victimisation situations (Davis, 2005). Routine activity theorists propose that when an adolescent spends time away from home, opportunities for bullying and victimisation increase (Groff, 2007). Scholars have also applied RAT to examine where and with whom a victim spends his or her time (Navarro & Jasinski, 2012; Popp & Peguero, 2011). Opportunities for bullying are created by routine activities of others in spaces, places, or locations where motivated offenders (perpetrators) frequent (Yar, 2005). RAT also includes three factors that converge prior to victimisation: (a) presence of a motivated offender (bullies), (b) attractive target (victims), and (c) absence of a capable guardian (Schreck, Wright & Miller, 2002). *Motivated offenders* could be anyone who has something to gain from victimising the target, whereas *attractive targets* comprise any persons who draw the motivated offenders towards the bullying (Felson & Boba, 2010). Attractive targets are also likely those who do not fit the adolescent social norms (e.g., gender non-conformity) and has few friends (typically those of a low social status; Jeralds, 2011). A *capable guardian* is someone (e.g., teachers) or something (e.g., surveillance measures) that inhibits the motivated offender from engaging in

bullying by increasing the likelihood that the perpetrator would be caught and punished (Felson & Boba, 2010).

Gender Role Socialisation Theory

As youth move from childhood to early adolescence, bullying in the form of name-calling becomes “gendered.” That is, youth report using homophobic epithets such as “that is so gay”, “no homo”, and “you are fag” (Espelage, Basile & Hamburger, 2012). Further, non-gendered bullying perpetration is a longitudinal precursor to homophobic name-calling during the middle school years (Espelage, Hong, *et al.*, in press). When homophobic name-calling is present in schools then youth attempt to demonstrate their heterosexuality by either using this language or sexually harassing members of the opposite sex in reaction. Thus, gender role socialisation theory offers some explanation as to how gender norms and violations of gender norms can lead to bullying and gendered harassment (e.g., homophobic name-calling, sexual harassment).

Within a social constructionist framework, masculine and feminine ideologies are the result of internalising culturally defined gender role norms and ideologies (Oransky & Fisher, 2009).

These norms and expectations influence behaviours and attitudes, especially when an individual holds strongly to particular aspects of these gender role ideologies. Research has suggested that boys who adhere to traditional male norms are at an increased risk of engaging in violence and aggression (Oransky & Fisher, 2009) and have a greater acceptance of violence against women (Flood & Pease, 2009). When girls hold traditional gender roles they are more likely to be victimised in interpersonal relationships (Flood & Pease, 2009). Feminist theories view sexual harassment as “*the product of a gender system maintained by a dominant, normative form of*

masculinity” (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004, pp. 66). In a society that privileges the heterosexual male as ideal, other forms of masculinity and femininity are consequently viewed as less ideal, with behaviours that maintain hegemonic masculinity being reinforced by the larger society. As a result adolescent boys ascribe to bolster their masculinity by engaging in behaviours that boost their ‘manhood’ in an effort to gain power and status among their peer group (Wei & Chen, 2012). When youth deviate from the prescribed gender norms, then they are likely to be the target of bullying and gendered harassment. These behaviours can be aggressive and/or sexual in nature, and often are seen as normal and a part of everyday activities. For example, many girls regularly hear boys make comments about their bodies and sexuality (Klein, 2006), and these comments are often ignored or their significance downplayed, which serves to reinforce the traditional masculine ideals (Espelage *et al.*, 2016). This is compounded by the reality that many girls will also adhere to traditional gender role ideologies, and in fact may themselves become dismissive of these sexually harassing behaviours. When girls are exposed to chronic sexual harassment, and their experiences are minimised by a lack of adult intervention, girls can become desensitised and eventually internalise dismissive attitudes toward sexual harassment (Larkin, 1994).

Anthropological perspectives

Anthropology, and more specifically sociocultural anthropology, is a discipline with potential to inform research on bullying and victimisation primarily through ethnographic research design (Holt *et al.*, 2016). Until the 1980s when the field of “anthropology of violence” emerged as a popular discourse (Accomazzo, 2012a), violence had primarily been dominated by psychological

and sociological paradigms, which theorised violence as a natural inclination of human beings or a product of their social conditions or culture (Thomas, 2012). To anthropologists, however, culture is inherently more complex and nuanced than originally understood and it is essential that theories of violence reflect this (Moore, 2008). In addition, the evolutionary basis of aggression is a hotly contested topic in the field of anthropology (Accomazzo, 2012a). Frameworks that are reflective of anthropological perspectives include evolutionary framework and sociocultural anthropological framework.

Evolutionary Framework

Physical anthropology comprises evolutionary, biological theories that are rooted in Darwinism (Accomazzo, 2012a). Early approaches to the study of violence in the field of physical anthropology tended to reflect an evolutionary view of human societies (Thomas, 2012). The fundamental idea of the evolutionary perspective is that species evolve to carry out or display certain behaviours or traits in order to survive and reproduce (Koh & Wong, 2015). From an evolutionary perspective, adolescents also have two underlying goals: growth/health/survival and finding an appropriate mate (Konner, 2010). An evolutionary perspective also views characteristics such as aggression and competition as being inherent in all humans; thus, bullying can be adaptive in gaining better sexual opportunities and physical protection (Volk, Camilleri, Dane & Marini, 2012). Bullying is also regarded as inherent in various animals (e.g., chicken, chimpanzee) and is adaptive in nature because it promotes access to physical, social, and sexual resources (Book, Volk & Hosker, 2012). Bullying fulfills the main mechanism of evolution, which is natural selection (i.e., “survival of the fittest”) because these youth carry a reputation as

aggressors and are perceived as being tough, which protects them from being targeted for aggression (Archer & Benson, 2008; Koh & Wong, 2008). Furthermore, empirical findings demonstrate that adolescents identified as bullies are physically stronger and have better mental health than victims (e.g., Juvonen, Graham & Schuster, 2003). In terms of sexual opportunities, some research evidence indicates that bullies of both sexes appear to begin puberty earlier, start dating at a younger age, and are likely to have more opportunities for dating/mating (Connolly, Pepler, Craig & Taradash, 2000). In addition, boys who are bullies are considered to be more attractive to the opposite sex, giving them more sexual opportunities (Volk *et al.*, 2012).

Sociocultural Anthropology Framework

Sociocultural anthropology places emphasis on exploring the importance of *culture* through ethnography. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the study of violence was for the most part limited to “traditional” or “tribal” societies. However, sociocultural anthropologists since the 1970s have recognised that violence occurs in all societies (Whitehead, 2004). Sociocultural anthropologists have shifted from focusing exclusively on small contained communities to studying larger communities that were confronted with the effects of globalism, colonialism, and capitalism (Accomazzo, 2012a). Cross-culturally, bullying has not been a central topic in the field of sociocultural anthropology; however, it has been documented in past ethnographic works. For example, Japanese children post-Second World War showed patterns of collectively ‘ganging up’ on another child (Benedict, 1946), a behaviour that is characterised as bullying. Numerous ethnographic studies on children and adolescents’ identity and socialisation have also explored cultural context and cultural patterns underlying bullying and aggression in school (see

MacDonald & Swart, 2004; Merton, 1994). In their ethnographic account of an elementary school in Gauteng, MacDonald and Swart (2004) explored how the culture of the particular school influenced bullying. Data from the study suggest that bullying is a complex phenomenon, which is produced as a result of a struggle for status and popularity, which seemed to promote social hierarchy in the peer culture. Other ethnographic studies have also linked bullying to intolerance of differences inherent in peer and school culture (Thornberg, 2011). For instance, Goodwin (2002) observed how girls, in their interactions with another girl who made all efforts to affiliate with them, produced degradation rituals in response to behaviour they regard as socially inappropriate. The socially constructed “odd” and “deviance” ascribed to the victim is also used to justify bullying and social exclusion (Goodwin, 2002; Thornberg, 2011).

Political-economic perspectives

The political-economic perspective of bullying and victimisation is rare, although researchers have come to acknowledge the importance of understanding the characteristics and factors associated with bullying from a macro lens (Horton, 2012). Political-economy is a concept, which refers to “the management of the economic affairs of the state” (Caporaso & Levine, 1992, p. 1), and how political institutions or environment and the economic systems (e.g., capitalist, socialist, etc.) shape one another (Weingast & Wittman, 2008). Political economists have traditionally applied political economy theories to help illuminate our understanding of collective violence and race riots (Accomazzo, 2012b). *Neo-classical theories of political economy* acknowledge that class conflicts resulting from capitalism and free market engender collective violence (Caporaso & Levine, 1992). *Radical theories of political economy* also

postulate that structural forces, such as poverty, discrimination, and inequality stem from capitalism (Barone, 2004), which can reinforce abuse, conflicts, and violence. In line with the radical theories of political economy, socio-economic inequality is found to be related to unequal balance of power between those with access to resources and those who do not (Chaux, Molano & Podlesky, 2009). Such unequal balance of power can lead to bullying directed by those with more power against those with less power. In one study, bullies were found to be overrepresented in middle and high SES families, whereas victims were overrepresented in low SES families (Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys & Kardeliene, 2008). In the economic literature, inequality is more significantly associated with violence than poverty (Fajnzylber, Lederman & Loayza, 2002). Bullying is also reportedly higher among children living in poor political and economic conditions (Chaux *et al.*, 2009; Carlson, 2006). A case in point, Chaux and colleagues (2009) explored socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-emotional variables associated with bullying from 53,316 children from 1,000 students in Colombia. The study reported higher levels of bullying in the presence of armed conflict and economic inequality.

Conclusion

An attempt to integrate social science theories and perspectives into the scholarship on bullying is imperative to move the field forward. In psychology, bullying is a major social problem that is largely attributed to characteristics of individuals and relationships between individuals, as well as complex interactions in an individual's immediate social environment including home, school, and community. However, scholars have come to realise that bullying permeates all socio-economic and ethnic and racial groups and, as a result, many other theories and perspectives in

social sciences have emerged to explain this complex phenomenon as resulting from larger socio-political dynamics. Sociologists emphasise that bullying is a social process where larger structural inequalities can contribute to bullying (Pascoe, 2013). Anthropological perspectives of bullying are less common; however, anthropologists can add new insights into bullying, as they propose that researchers must better understand what adaptive, evolutionary functions bullying can perform (Holt *et al.*, 2016). Political-economic perspectives on bullying are also rare, although political scientists and economists can shed light on structural conditions and ideologies (e.g., capitalism) that place children of low socio-economic status at an elevated risk of bullying and victimisation.

This chapter provides a trans-disciplinary analysis, as well as a singular analysis, of theories and perspectives that move the research beyond a psychologically dominated explanation of bullying. The work presented here can facilitate this by providing a launch-pad for the development of better integrated and truly interdisciplinary theory.

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