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Expanding the Social-Ecological Framework of Bullying among Youth: Lessons Learned from the Past and Directions for the Future [Chapter 1]

Susan M. Swearer and Dorothy L. Espelage

Broad problems require broad hypotheses.

(Morse & Allport, 1952)

In 1952, an article was published in the *Journal of Psychology* that sought to unearth the causes of anti-Semitism (Morse & Allport, 1952). What the authors found was that the variables related to anti-Semitism included physical behaviors (i.e., discriminatory actions), verbal behavior (i.e., derogatory comments), and affective states (i.e., feelings of aversion). The authors also concluded that no one factor could be delineated as the only cause of anti-Semitism. The complexities of behaviors that comprise discrimination have been studied for over 60 years. When the first edition of this book was published in 2004, we argued that bullying had to be studied across individual, peer, family, school, community, and cultural contexts (see Figure 1.1). Like discrimination, bullying is a complex phenomenon, with multiple causal factors and multiple outcomes.

We and other authors (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Garbarino & deLara, 2002; Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000; Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer et al., 2006) have continued to frame bullying among school-aged youth from this social ecological perspective. Drawing a parallel to discriminatory behavior, research on bullying has established that bully perpetration includes physical and verbal behavior within an affective framework (i.e., the intent to harm) (Olweus, 1993; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Bullying comprises a complex set of antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. The reasons why children and adolescents bully one another are complex, multiply-determined, and differentially reinforced. In the next section we will explicate these factors and frame the content for the second edition of *Bullying in North American Schools*.

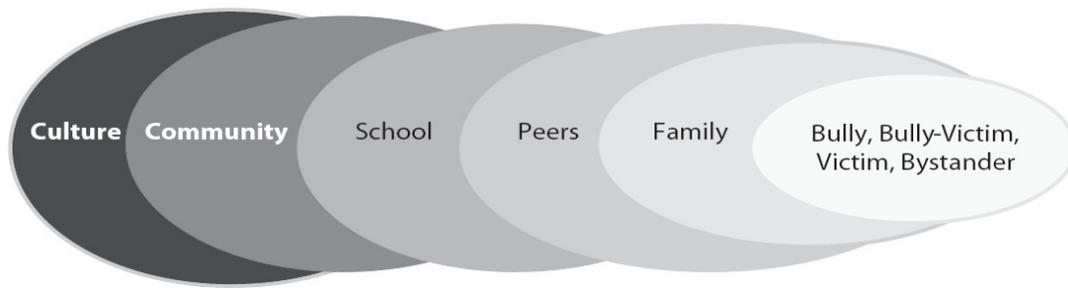


Figure 1.1 An expanded social-ecological framework of bullying among youth.

Equifinality of Bullying Behaviors

In the mid-1900s, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, an Austrian biologist, developed a theory known as General System Theory (GST; von Bertalanffy, 1969) that posited that the same result may be achieved via many different paths. This concept is termed “equifinality.” Applied to the study of human behavior, equifinality refers to the fact that many different early experiences can lead to similar outcomes. In other words, there are many different early experiences that can lead to the same end result. Specific to the study of bullying behaviors, equifinality suggests that there are many different factors that can result in the bullying phenomenon.

Much has been written about the reciprocal interplay among the individual, family, peer group, school, community, and cultural influences on human behavior. Motivated by the writings of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979), research on bullying and peer victimization has been influenced by the reality that human behavior is multiply-determined and multiply-influenced (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001; Espelage & Swearer, 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Swearer et al., 2006). Take for example the following scenario:

A child (we’ll call her Sarah) who is impulsive and who has a hostile attributional style lives in a family with a father who is a biologist who works in private industry and a mother who is a homemaker. Sarah’s mother is very concerned about her daughter’s social status and she wants her to have all the advantages that she didn’t have growing up. Sarah goes to school in a middle-class community with a high emphasis on athletics. She is one of the star athletes, playing soccer, soft ball, and club swimming. In the community in which Sarah lives, athletics are highly valued and the girls on her soccer team enjoy high social status. The girls all have Facebook accounts, cell phones, and are typical adolescents, spending about four hours per day on their computers and cell phones. A new girl (we’ll call her Beth) who is also a star athlete moves into the community. Sarah and her friends end up being relationally aggressive to Beth. As they tell the story, she “deserved” the bullying since her family bought the largest house in this community and she had an “attitude.” What they failed to mention was that Beth tried out for the soccer team and was awarded a starting position over one of Sarah’s friends, who had been on the team for three years. Sarah and her friend organized a Facebook campaign against Beth, who was devastated when she found out that her “friends” on the soccer team were spreading rumors that she was a lesbian. Her parents didn’t understand what happened since Beth was always well liked and had been a star athlete and student throughout junior high and in to her high school years.

If we change any variable in this example, the end result is that the bullying might not have happened. As the complexity of this example illustrates, the principle of equifinality can be applied to bullying behavior. There are no simple explanations for bullying – it is often the result of complex psychological and social interactions.

Overview of *Bullying in North American Schools*

The second edition of this book is an exciting compilation of research conducted across North America by a representative group of psychological researchers, including developmental psychologists, social psychologists, counseling psychologists, school psychologists, and clinical psychologists who are studying bullying among school-aged youth. Thus, the contributors in this volume bring both research and clinical perspectives to the phenomena of bullying and peer victimization. As such, this book provides support for the complexity of bullying behaviors and offers suggestions for using databased decision-making to intervene and reduce bullying among school-aged youth. Given the complexity of bullying, it is our aim that this book will provide guidance for researchers, school personnel, parents, and students as they develop prevention and intervention programming to put an end to bullying in our nation's schools. In the sections that follow, we will outline the chapters that comprise this exciting second edition of *Bullying in North American Schools*.

Individual Characteristics Associated with Bullying

In this section, the chapters unearth individual factors that are associated with bullying among school-aged youth. As the example of Sarah and Beth illustrate, individual personality characteristics are part of the equifinality in resultant bullying behaviors. Swearer, Collins, Radliff, and Wang in their chapter "Internalizing Problems in Students Involved in Bullying and Victimization" review and demonstrate the important role of internalizing behaviors among bullies, victims, and bully-victims. They present data collected on a longitudinal sample of 5th through 9th graders and suggest that bullying prevention should include not only primary prevention approaches, but also more targeted one-on-one mental health treatment for bullies, victims, and bully-victims. These factors are further explicated in Vaillancourt, Hymel, and McDougall's chapter "Why does being Bullied Hurt so Much?: Insights from Neuroscience" where they argue that being bullied causes significant social pain, which, over time, alters brain functioning. These insights from neuroscience have been notably missing from the bullying literature and Vaillancourt and colleagues make this important link. In addition to understanding these individual personality and neurological characteristics among youth involved in bullying and victimization, Rose reviews the literature on bullying among students with disabilities in his chapter "Bullying among Students with Disabilities: Impact and Implications," and argues that interventions must target at-risk subgroups of students. Whole-school anti-bullying initiatives may not effectively address bullying by or toward students who are in special education.

Two chapters in this section deal with a growing concern for parents and educators – cyberbullying or technologically based aggression. Ybarra, Espelage, and Martin in their chapter "Unwanted Sexual and Harassing Experiences: From School to Text Messaging" examine the intersection of youth sexual and relational/physical harassment at school and through text messaging. Of children and adolescents between 10 and 18 years of age, 23% of youth reported some type of harassment both at school and via text messaging. Findings suggest that harassment both inside and outside of school may affect school safety perceptions. Underwood and Rosen in their literature review of gender differences in bullying and cyberbullying, "Gender and Bullying: Moving Beyond Mean Differences to Consider Conceptions of Bullying, Processes by which Bullying Un-

olds, and Cyberbullying,” encourage the field to more carefully consider boys’ and girls’ experiences in the development of prevention programs. More specifically, girls who are often victims of bullying experience bullying in the form of sexual harassment and these authors urge scholars to call these experiences sexual harassment rather than bullying. They also urge scholars and educators to consider the different peer victimization experiences in school and in cyberspace for boys and girls.

Peer Characteristics Associated with Bullying

The idea that similarities are more salient than differences in peer group membership is called the *homophily hypothesis* (Kandel, 1978) and has been empirically linked to bullying by both boys and girls (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Espelage and colleagues demonstrated that students tended to affiliate with other students who perpetrated bullying at similar frequencies and students who hung out in bullying peer groups increased in their amount of self-reported bullying over the course of a school year. Certainly individual characteristics are influenced by the peer group and the chapters in this section illustrate the complexity of the role of peers in bullying and victimization.

Hawley, Stump, and Ratliff in their chapter “Sidestepping the Jingle Fallacy: Bullying, Aggression, and the Importance of Knowing the Difference” remind readers that “the jingle fallacy,” which was coined in the early 1900s by educational researcher Edward L. Thorndike to illustrate the danger of referring to two different psychological constructs using the same label (i.e., “bullying” and “aggression”), may be a factor in understanding the function that bullying holds in peer groups. These authors draw from self-determination theory and resource control theory to understand the function that bullying and aggression serve in the peer group. Pellegrini and Van Ryzin in their chapter “Part of the Problem *and* Part of the Solution: The Role of Peers in Bullying, Dominance, and Victimization during the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School” demonstrate in greater detail the powerful role of peers over the transition from elementary to middle school. These authors provide some important guidance in how positive peer relations can be promoted in educational interventions, such as peer mentoring. Rodkin and Gest in their chapter “Teaching Practices, Classroom Peer Ecologies, and Bullying Behaviors among Schoolchildren” propose a peer ecological approach to understanding bullying among school-aged youth. This model examines social structures in the classroom setting and examines the influence of teacher-student interactions. Collectively, these chapters set the stage for examining bullying in the contexts in which these behaviors occur.

Classroom Characteristics Associated with Bullying

A discussion of gender differences in bullying and peer victimization experiences continues in the chapter entitled “Girls, Boys, and Bullying in Preschool: The Role of Gender in the Development of Bullying” by Hanish, Hill, Gosney, Fabes, and Martin who review the empirical data on the prevalence of bullying among preschool children. Their data suggest that preschool children who are exposed to aggressive youth are at risk for engaging in aggression themselves. This effect appears to be most relevant for boys in preschool, given the tendency for preschoolers to play in gender-segregated groups. This chapter includes a discussion of a population – preschoolers – that are often not included in bully investigations and also includes data from several studies that employ cutting-edge observational methods.

Doll, Song, Champion, and Jones in their chapter “Classroom Ecologies that Support or Discourage Bullying” consider the ways in which classrooms and teachers encourage or inhibit bullying behaviors. In their chapter, we learn that classrooms with positive teacher-student relationships have less bullying and peer aggression than classrooms where the teacher-student relations are strained. Individual students and peers also play a role in minimizing bullying in the classroom. We learn in this chapter how classrooms can promote self-determination in individual students and how peers who are bystanders can be encouraged to contribute to the development of prosocial behaviors. Teachers are encouraged to have consistently reinforced rules and routines, and to maintain open dialogue with students. In the chapter “Teachers’ Attitudes toward Bullying” Holt, Keyes, and Koenig tackle the important function of school culture and explicate the link between school personnel attitudes and school culture. Specifically, equity, hostile climate, openness to diversity, and willingness to intervene are school climate factors connected to bullying among school-aged youth. Importantly, these authors discuss that school culture varies by school.

School and Family Characteristics Associated with Bullying

Because school culture varies by individual schools and school climate is created by staff and student attitudes, it logically follows that school and family characteristics are linked to bullying and victimization. As the example of Sarah and Beth illustrates, school and family contexts are important influences on bullying and peer victimization. In the chapter “School Climate and Change in Personality Disorder Symptom Trajectories Related to Bullying: A Prospective Study,” Kasen, Johnson, Chen, Crawford, and Cohen take the reader from classroom-level understanding of bullying to the school-level. Through a complex longitudinal study of the impact of school climate on the intersection of personality and bullying, these authors discuss the importance of minimizing the levels of teacher-student conflict and the importance of this interaction on school climate. Demaray and Malecki explicate this interaction in their chapter “The Role of Social Support in the Lives of Students Involved in Bullying” by reviewing the importance of adult and peer social support. They conclude that students who are bullied perceive less social support from peers and students who perpetrate bullying perceive less social support from parents and teachers. The role of social support is an important contextual factor in bullying prevention and intervention programming.

Leff, Freedman, MacEnvoy, and Power in their chapter “Considerations when Measuring Outcomes to Assess for the Effectiveness of Bullying- and Aggression-Prevention Programs in Schools” use their years of experiences in the Philadelphia public schools to encourage researchers to use community partnership-based methods to study bullying behaviors. Their methodologies for studying bullying behaviors are clearly linked to the conclusions drawn in the literature and the complexity of designing studies from a partnership-based approach will strengthen the literature base. In the chapter “Family Relationships of Bullies and Victims,” Duncan reviews what is known about the families of bullies, victims, and bully-victims. Her review of the literature highlights the areas of research that are still understudied. It is also clear from her chapter that familial characteristics such as parenting practices, abuse, and sibling aggression are significant predictors of bullying involvement. This work suggests that bullying prevention programs need to consider how to modify these risk factors. Studying bullying across school and family contexts is vital, yet most of the bullying prevention and intervention programs do not take into account the role of family, community, or culture.

Effective Bullying Prevention and Intervention Programs

When we present workshops to teachers and parents about bullying prevention and intervention, we are fond of saying, "It's not the program, it's the people." It is people who will help stop bullying in our schools and communities. Programs are sufficient for changing behavior, but caring, dedicated people are necessary in order to stop bullying behavior. Additionally, we suggest that school personnel consider adopting bullying prevention and intervention strategies that have an evidence-base. There are over 300 published violence prevention programs geared toward schools, however, less than a quarter of these programs are empirically validated (Howard, Flora, & Griffin, 1999). In this final section of the book, the chapters present programs that have an evidence base and that have been implemented in school settings for over a decade. As such, these programs have addressed real-world implementation issues and have a solid database on which to examine their effectiveness.

Low, Smith, Brown, Fernandez, Hanson, and Haggerty in their chapter "Design and Analysis of a Randomized Controlled Trial of Steps to Respect: A School-Based Bullying Prevention Program" describe the *Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program* that was developed by the Committee for Children in Seattle, Washington. They report data on their school-randomized program evaluation. One compelling finding was that school staff underestimate the extent of bullying among students and they overestimate students' willingness to intervene and student confidence in the ability of staff to effectively intervene. These results have direct implications for bullying prevention and intervention programming. Several of the chapters discuss bullying prevention programs that focus on teacher training. Frey, Carlson Jones, Hirschstein, and Edstrom present results in their chapter "Teacher Support of Bullying Prevention: The Good, the Bad, and the Promising" from their evaluation of teaching coaching aspects of the *Steps to Respect* program (StR; Committee for Children, 2001). These authors highlight the efficacy of teacher interventions on reducing bullying in classrooms through empathy scaffolding, brief individual coaching sessions with students involved in bullying situations, and emotion regulation. The *Bully Busters* prevention program (Newman et al., 2000) is discussed in the chapter "Bully Busters: A Resource for Schools and Parents to Prevent and Respond to Bullying" by Horne, Bell, Raczynski, and Whitford. *Bully Busters* is a program directed at increasing knowledge, efficacy, and competence of teachers to prevent bullying in their classrooms. The components of both the elementary and the middle school versions of *Bully Busters* are discussed and evaluation data are presented.

Several chapters discuss bullying prevention programs that target the entire school community through comprehensive whole-school approaches. Plog, Garrity, Jens, and Porter discuss in detail *Bully-Proofing Your School* (Garrity, Jens, Porter, Sager, & Short-Camilli, 1994, 2004) in their chapter "Bully-Proofing Your School: Overview of the Program, Outcome Research, and Questions that Remain about how Best to Implement Effective Bullying Prevention in Schools." Limber summarizes the components of the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* (Olweus, 1993) in her chapter "Implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in American Schools: Lessons Learned from the Field." Both of these programs focus on staff training and student instruction with the goal of shifting school-level and classroom-level attitudes and behaviors from bullying to prosocial interactions. In the chapter "Integrating Strategies for Bullying, Sexual Harassment, and Dating Violence Prevention: The Expect Respect Elementary School Project," Rosenbluth, Whitaker, Valle, and Ball describe the *Expect Respect Elementary School Project* in Austin, Texas. This program is unique in that it links bullying prevention to dating violence prevention, recognizing the connection between bullying, sexual harassment, and dating violence. This chapter also illustrates the importance of developing school district and state policies regarding harassment and bullying. The authors note that in order to address these problematic behaviors, integrated, multilevel, and youth-led approaches need to be promoted.

Translating Research into Practice: Implications for Bullying Prevention and Intervention Programming

The value of research is its applicability. Our work in bullying and peer victimization is only as important as it positively impacts the lives of youth, families, and schools that are impacted by these behaviors. We hope that this book continues to help advance the link between research and practice as we seek to understand the dynamics surrounding bullying behaviors. Each chapter in the book ends with a section, "Translating research into practice: Implications for bullying prevention and intervention programs." As noted in the beginning of this chapter, not only do "broad problems require broad hypotheses," but also large problems are complex, multiply-determined, and differentially reinforced. The solutions to stopping bullying behaviors must be framed from a social ecological perspective if we are to have any hope of truly stopping bullying in North American schools.

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