



## Articulating the theory of bullying intervention programs: Views from social psychology, social work, and organizational science



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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online 29 December 2014

#### Keywords:

Bullying  
Prevention  
Intervention  
Theory

### ABSTRACT

Outcomes associated with bullying intervention programs have been described in their collective as “disappointing” (Stassen Berger, 2007). As anxiety mounts about the prevalence and severity of bullying incidents in schools, reactive yet ineffective policy initiatives often result (e.g., criminalizing bullying). These initiatives, though well intentioned, result from a lack of understanding of the complexity of the school ecology and mechanisms of behavioral change. Moreover, the modest effects often found for antibullying interventions may be due, in part, to the lack of a clearly articulated, comprehensive, and coherent theoretical grounding to explain each programmatic element of commonly used interventions in North America, and, importantly, the interactions among them. In this opening piece to the present collection of papers, we focus on the mechanisms underlying the attitudes and behaviors of constituents within a school's ecology and the communities within which the school is embedded. To that end, the present piece articulates theoretical views from social psychology, social work, and organizational science, frameworks heretofore overlooked by the bullying intervention literature. Strategies for increasing the visibility of this work to community stakeholders are also discussed. Thus, this special issue seeks to stimulate dialog among interventionists to improve the policy and practice response to bullying behavior among children and adolescents.

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As of September 1, 2011, and in part as a response to the suicide of Tyler Clementi (the freshman at Rutgers), New Jersey initiated the Anti-bullying Bill of Rights, the toughest in the nation. In East Hanover, the district is collaborating with Crimestoppers to facilitate the reporting of bullying. Such responses fall under the auspices of zero-tolerance policies which crop up regularly when very bad things happen to innocent people. According to the American Psychological Association, the nation's discourse on disciplinary procedures in response to aggression in schools has been characterized by a zero-tolerance ethos (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

Even more recently, with the release of *Bully* in March of 2012,<sup>1</sup> there have been additional calls to action. First and foremost, the film serves as a compelling example of the costs of bullying and repeated harassment for 5 victimized youths: Kelby Johnson, out lesbian who encounters homophobia in her neighborhood and parental social network; Alex Libby of whom we see jarring footage of his bullying on the bus ride to school; Je'meya Jackson who took extreme measures of self-defense in response to chronic harassment and ended up incarcerated; and Tyler

Long and Ty Smalley, both of whom committed suicide before the age of 18. Second, the film made clear the utter inability of most of the adults surrounding these children to see these costs clearly and their failure to effectively intervene. Kirk Smalley (Ty's father) has urged the outlawing of bullying.

Implementing measures that give the appearance of immediacy and effectiveness (e.g., implementing laws) has its appeal, especially in the eyes of the public and media (Stassen Berger, 2007). But there is little evidence to suggest that such measures alone are effective, and some evidence to suggest they can be harmful to school climate (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Many states' policies calling for antibullying interventions (e.g., Kansas) include little detail, direction, or additional resources. Thus, districts are often left wondering about how to best address the problem of bullying or how to comply with their state's policy. As a result, schools may invest in ineffective practices or simply allow teachers to ‘follow their instincts’ in implementing some semblance of zero tolerance. Indeed by both legislatures and school districts alike, the complexity of the problem is poorly understood (Stassen Berger, 2007). In fact, one glaring and potentially dangerous omission in *Bully* is that we do not hear at all from informed interventionists or the scientific community.

Although contemporary bullying intervention programs have moved well beyond reactionary zero tolerance policies, efficacy studies reveal mixed results showing at best modest effects of interventions implemented in North America (Baldry & Farrington, 2004; Cross,

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<sup>1</sup> Because this film vividly portrayed the multiple layers of the problems associated with bullying and because many if not most readers will have seen the film, we refer to it for illustrative (not instructive) purposes.

Hall, Hamilton, Pintabona, & Erceg, 2004; Frey, Hirschstein, Snell, Edstrom, MacKenzie and Broderick, 2005; Frey, Nolen, Van Schoiack Edstrom and Hirschstein, 2005; O'Moore & Minton, 2004; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994; Smith, Salmivalli, & Cowie, 2012), and only in some age groups. Indeed, even the commonly considered gold standard for American intervention (e.g., Olweus, 1993) has not been rigorously tested in the United States in ways consistent with high standards of program evaluation (see Flay et al., 2005 for these standards).

### Goals of the present article

Consistent with the goals of this special issue on enhancing bullying prevention and intervention strategies via theoretical articulation, we describe, interpret, and synthesize several theoretical perspectives that we believe stand to improve school-based bullying interventions aimed at individual and ecological change. We discovered, upon closer examination of common bullying prevention approaches, that most lack clearly articulated, comprehensive, and coherent theoretical grounding to explain each programmatic element at all levels of the intervention, and, importantly, the interactions among them. In turn, a clearly articulated theory would in principle give rise to predictions about which programmatic elements would account for the most change in the targeted outcomes, in which age groups, and why (see e.g., Smith et al., 2012; Tofi & Farrington, 2011, 2012; Yeager, 2015—in this issue). To do so, we argue here that we should examine the proximal mechanisms underlying perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral change, and the paradigm which most effectively has done just this is social psychology. We apply this work to bullying here for the first time (see also Hymel et al.'s interpretations of social psychology, this issue).

Moreover, clarity would inform efforts in international translation of programs with promising effects (Kärnä et al., 2011). There appears to be a good deal of faith in assuming that what will work in one social context will work in another. This assumption largely can be blamed on the fact that we have also not clarified the role of the larger social context. Indeed, little attention has been given in the bullying prevention literature to the larger ecological contexts — in particular, the macrosystem (see Bronfenbrenner, 1995) and concomitant norms beyond the school grounds that may endorse the persecution of certain groups (e.g., racial prejudices, homophobic sentiments in parents' social circles). These risks hold true for any child at odds with community norms and valued social identities, as we will argue. Thus, an important extension here is the application of ecological systems theory by drawing attention to the macrosystem and how existing community norms influence the beliefs and behaviors of school staff, which may hinder intervention efforts. Consequently, the present piece articulates aspects of school climate and culture — which represent distinct organizational phenomena but have yet to be differentiated in the bullying prevention literature to date — that may be amenable to change within antibullying interventions aimed at creating positive school environments.

The present synthesis is not exhaustive. Indeed other theoretical treatments exist, especially emphasizing socio-emotional competence training and goal perspective approaches (Rigby, 2012; Veenstra et al., 2007) as well as ecological frameworks drawing attention to the importance of peer groups and social contexts in school settings (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). The present work, in contrast, highlights contributions from social psychology, social work, and organizational science, views with little impact thus far on school-wide interventions.

We begin by defining the problem of bullying and introducing the concept of power. Second, we integrate work from the field of social psychology by introducing the Theory of Planned Behavior and explicating how it explains attitudinal change and prescribes avenues for changing perceptions and behaviors; and discuss the power of the bystander. Third, we draw attention to the views of social work by expanding on Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspectives to elucidate how interactions within school settings (student–student, staff–student, etc.) are a function of the prevailing community and societal norms and the implications of

these norms for bullying prevention efforts. Fourth we introduce empirical and theoretical work from organizational science and in particular draw attention to the important role power plays in organizations. We will argue that understanding power and influence in organizations as well as other aspects of organizational culture is essential for successful implementation of bullying prevention programs, particularly those that seek to alter a school's ecology. We close by offering recommendations intended to enhance intervention efforts by drawing attention to key mechanisms of behavioral and ecological change, addressing the highly relevant questions of for whom and under what conditions interventions may be most successful. These recommendations based on theoretical viewpoints from social psychology, organizational science, and social work — indeed, developmentalists will find overlap with common developmental theory, such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977a) — stand to make important contributions to the development and testing of developmentally appropriate, ecologically sensitive intervention and prevention approaches aimed at curbing this concerning behavior among youths.

### Defining the problem

#### Starting with clear definitions

Awareness of the 'problem of the bully' goes back hundreds of years, references to which emerge in the literature as early as the late 1600s. Early literary references (e.g., Dickens, 1838/1846) portray bullying as "petty tyranny". These representations have shaped public thought to construe bullies not only as aggressive, but also as having deep character flaws and having wide-ranging social incompetencies. Accordingly, very early intervention efforts focused on aggressive youths themselves in an attempt to right these defects (e.g., Beckham, 1933; Hart, 1931), a predilection that remains today. Accordingly, targeted intervention efforts (i.e., indicated actions) focused on bullies remain an important component of nearly all intervention programs (Frey, Hirschstein, et al., 2005; Frey, Nolen, et al., 2005; Salmivalli, Karna, & Poskiparta, 2010).

Though public perceptions and conventional wisdoms may persist in this regard, it is now cliché to consider all bullies to be socially unskilled tyrants, at least in scientific circles. Work in the 1990s started demonstrating the heterogeneity of aggressive children and providing theoretical rationales for their development (Hawley, 1999; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). Skilled aggressors enjoy social esteem (Farmer & Rodkin, 1996; Hawley, 2003), especially with the right peer group dynamics (e.g., Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988; Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2008). Though not necessarily about bullies per se, this body of work raised questions about the competencies and social successes of aggressive children (Hawley, Little, & Rodkin, 2007). It remains to be seen to what extent these findings and discussions can be extended to bullying. However, some measure of the positive reception of bullies is already evident (Reijntjes et al., 2013). The general thought had long been that bullies would be incompetent and disliked (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Discussions at present appear to be leaning toward bullies (cf. bully-victims; Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, & Schwartz, 2011) being powerful, perhaps popular, but not beloved (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003; but see Garandeau, Wilson, & Rodkin, 2010; Hawley, Card, & Little, 2007; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Reijntjes et al., 2013), but liking appears to vary by context (e.g., Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2007). Bullying has even been described as an evolutionary adaptation (Ellis et al., 2011; Volk, Camilleri, Dane, & Marini, 2012). At the very least, there appears to be some agreement that bullying yields several social rewards, including power, status, and, perhaps more controversially, positive esteem from peers.

Serious scientific inquiry into the causes, consequences, and group processes related to bullying has really only emerged in the last decades,

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