



Update on bullying at school: Science forgotten?

Kathleen Stassen Berger

*Social Sciences Department, Bronx Community College, City University of New York,
181st Street and University Avenue, Bronx, NY 10453, USA*

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Abstract

Research on bullying has increased dramatically worldwide, from only 62 citations in PsycINFO from 1900–1990, to 289 in the 1990s, to 562 from 2000–2004. Much has been learned, including that bullying takes many forms (physical, verbal, relational), is prevalent in every school, with long-lasting consequences. It is not known how genes, parents, peers, cultural values, and school practices interact to affect bullying and victimization nor why some schools fail to reduce the harm. This paper reviews past findings on school bullying, notes a slowing of publication, reminds readers of the need for the scientific process, and highlights the reasons for additional research, especially in data collection, evaluation, developmental understanding, and prevention.

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Much is now known about bullies and victims, including some surprises: bullies have friends and admirers; victims look like other children; bullying occurs everywhere; victimization is a social event. Discoveries on prevalence, consequences, causes, and prevention often contradict popular assumptions, which is one reason bullying among children has become a productive topic for scientists of many disciplines. Although not reviewed here, bullying among adults has also captured attention. Yet much remains to be discovered, especially from a developmental perspective. A summary of publication history helps explain the current state of knowledge and the urgent need for more scientific research.

E-mail address: keen5@ix.netcom.com

Research and publication history

Researchers in human development have long been interested in peer relationships and in aggression. The current understanding of peer groups emphasizes the importance of friendship at every point of the lifespan, and notes the many reasons that children are accepted or rejected by their classmates, further exploring children's status as popular, well-liked, controversial, aggressive-rejected, withdrawn-rejected, and neglected (see reviews: Kupersmidt & Dodge, 2004; Ladd, 2005). Similarly, scientists studying violence have recognized a seemingly omnipresent impulse to attack, and have described many causes, forms, and consequences of aggression, varying by species, gender, stage, and context (see Tremblay, Hartup, & Archer, 2005).

Research on bullying among children has benefited from findings in both of these areas, but bullying has not yet received the decades of scientific attention required for a comprehensive understanding. Ironically, one reason for gaps in research is that interest typically arises from practical and urgent concerns, when a sudden death in school brings public attention and research funding. This immediacy sometimes clashes with the patient, cumulative process of developmental science, as emotions allow science to be forgotten.

Within the past 15 years, scholars have shifted from indifference to fascination regarding bullies. PsycINFO includes only 27 citations of bully* or bulli* (peer-reviewed, not counting proper names) from 1900 to 1979 and only 35 in the next decade. In the 1990s, PsycINFO lists 289 cites, and the first listing of bull* appeared in the index of *Abstracts in Child Development*. Those 351 PsycINFO publications for the entire 20th century were surpassed in the first five years of the 21st. Between January 1st 2000 and December 31, 2004, 592 peer-reviewed articles, editorials, or book reviews were published, 158 of them in 2004. Other data bases (e.g., Academic Search Premier, ERIC) or related search terms (e.g., victim*, harass*) reveal a similar increase, although less explosive. [More psychological research overall has been published recently, but few topics unrelated to bullying show dramatic increase.]

Why the explosion? It began with one scientist and three suicides. Dan Olweus studied bullying (*mobbning*) in his native Sweden (1973) and wrote the first scholarly book in English (1978). When three bullied Norwegian boys committed suicide in 1982, their government commissioned Olweus. He reported (1986, translated and updated in English, 1993) what was thought to be extraordinarily high prevalence (20% of Norwegian school children were either bullies or victims) and notable success (school bullying was reduced by half in two years).

Olweus inspired researchers world-wide, undertaking major studies in Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, and, more recently, the United States. They defined and explored terminology, assessed prevalence, searched for consequences and causes, and attempted prevention in thousands of schools, making major progress on the first two of these five, definitions and prevalence, over the past 15 years.

Much scholarly work remains on the other three, consequences, causes, and prevention. Unfortunately, the pace of publication is slowing. Only 136 peer-reviewed articles on bullying were published in 2005, about 15% less than in 2004 (PsycINFO again). Only 53 of those 2005 publications (listed on Table 1) included new data on bullying in school, and only 11 were primarily concerned with intervention. Has this slowdown occurred because all is known? By no means. Does the clash between public and scientific perspectives (see

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