Four Decades of Research on School Bullying

An Introduction

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This article provides an introductory overview of findings from the past 40 years of research on bullying among school-aged children and youth. Research on definitional and assessment issues in studying bullying and victimization is reviewed, and data on prevalence rates, stability, and forms of bullying behavior are summarized, setting the stage for the 5 articles that comprise this American Psychologist *special issue on bullying and victimization. These articles address bullying, victimization, psychological sequela and consequences, ethical, legal, and theoretical issues facing educators, researchers, and practitioners, and effective prevention and intervention efforts. The goal of this special issue is to provide psychologists with a comprehensive review that documents our current understanding of the complexity of bullying among school-aged youth and directions for future research and intervention efforts.*

Keywords: bullying, victimization, school violence

School bullying has been around for as long as anyone can remember, featured in Western literature for over 150 years (e.g., Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* [Dickens, 1839/1966]; Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* [Hughes, 1857/1892]). Today, bullying permeates popular culture in the form of reality TV and violent video games, and in our free-market, capitalist society. In contrast, empirical research on bullying is a relatively recent focus, the earliest studies emerging in the 1970s in Scandinavia (Olweus, 1978). In North America, public concern about school bullying increased dramatically in the late 1990s, owing in large part to the tragic deaths of our youth by suicide (Marr & Fields, 2001) or murder, especially the 1997 murder of Rina Virk (Godfrey, 2005) and the Columbine massacre in 1998 (Cullen, 2009). Since then, bullying has received unprecedented attention in the media and in academia, both nationally and internationally (e.g., Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010), and remains a significant concern among parents and educators. Inspired by the 2011 U.S. White House Conference on Bullying, hosted by President and First Lady Obama and the Department of Education, this special issue was undertaken, inviting recognized scholars to critically review current research and theory on school bullying, in an effort to inform future research and practice. Here, we describe some of what we have learned over the past 40 years, setting the stage for the five articles that comprise this special issue.

What Is Bullying and How Do We Assess It?

Following the pioneering work of Olweus (1978, 1999, 2001), bullying has been defined as a subcategory of interpersonal aggression characterized by *intentionality*, *repetition*, and an *imbalance of power*, with abuse of power being a primary distinction between bullying and other forms of aggression (e.g., Smith & Morita, 1999; Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). Scholars generally endorse these characteristics, as does the U.S. Centers For Disease Control (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014), the American Psychological Association (VandenBos, 2007), and the National Association of School Psychologists (2012). However, assessments of bullying do not always emphasize these components (see Hamburger, Basile, & Vivolo, 2011, *Compendium of Assessment Tools*), making distinctions between bullying and other forms of aggression less clear (see Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Moreover, children's descriptions of bullying rarely include these definitional criteria (Vaillancourt et

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al., 2008), leading many researchers to provide definitions of bullying in their assessments.

Much debate exists regarding the best method and informant for assessing bullying and victimization (e.g., Cornell & Cole, 2012; Swearer, Siebecker, Johnsen-Freirichs, & Wang, 2010), with measurement issues heralded as the "Achilles heel" of bullying research (Cornell, Sheras, & Cole, 2006). Although some suggest use of multiple informants to establish psychometric adequacy (e.g., Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001), the reality of assessing a complex, underground behavior involving multiple participants and influenced by multiple factors is that there may be no single "gold standard" for accuracy. Bullying has been assessed via parent, teacher, and peer reports, as well as direct observations, but most rely on self-report assessments, despite concerns about biases related to social desirability, self-presentation, and/or fear of retaliation (Pellegrini, 2001). Self-reports are economical and efficient, and give youth a much-deserved voice in the assessment process, tapping perceptions of both victims and perpetrators. Although more time consuming, peer assessments are viewed as an alternative to self-reports (e.g., Cornell & Cole, 2012), especially given observational evidence (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010) that peers are present in at least 85% of bullying incidents. Based on information from multiple informants, peer assessments can provide unique information about bullying. For example, Chan (2006) identified two major patterns of bullying using peer reports. "Serial bullies," named as perpetrators by multiple victims, accounted for nearly 70% of victim reports. Most of the remaining reports reflected "multiple victimization," with several perpetrators bullying the same individual. Self- and peer-reports, however, demonstrate only modest correspondence (*r* range = .2 to .4; Branson &

Cornell, 2009; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Österman et al., 1994; Pellegrini, 2001). Teacher and parent reports are more suspect, given that bullying occurs primarily in the peer group, especially in places with little adult supervision (e.g., Vaillancourt, Brittain, et al., 2010). Parents often have limited knowledge of what happens at school, and teachers may not actually witness bullying (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004) or may choose to ignore it (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000).

Rather than debating the superiority of one approach over another, we echo Juvonen et al. (2001) that these be considered complementary sources of information, each contributing to our understanding of bullying. Moreover, selection of an assessment approach depends on the nature of the research questions. If the accurate identification of victimized children is the focus, Phillips and Cornell (2012) have demonstrated the utility of using a combination of peer assessments, confirmed subsequently through interviews by school counselors, underscoring the value of investing greater efforts to assure accuracy in identification. A primary focus has been on evaluating school-based interventions (see Bradshaw, 2015), for which peer reports may be less sensitive to change over time than self-reports, as they are often based on reputations that may not shift despite behavior changes (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990; Juvonen et al., 2001). At the same time, Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom, and Snell (2009) found self-reports to be less sensitive to change than more costly and time-consuming observations. Still, across informants, it is clear that far too many of our youth are victims of bullying at school, a place they are required by law to attend.

How Prevalent Is Bullying and Victimization?

Documented prevalence rates for bullying vary greatly across studies, with 10% to 33% of students reporting victimization by peers, and 5% to 13% admitting to bullying others (e.g., Cassidy, 2009; Dulmus, Sowers, & Theriot, 2006; Kessel Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Nansel et al., 2001; Perkins, Craig, & Perkins, 2011; Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006). Such variations reflect differences in assessment approaches, as well as differences across individuals (sex, age), contexts, and cultures. Typically, boys report more bullying than girls, but girls report more victimization (e.g., Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Olweus, 1993). Developmentally, peer bullying is evident as early as preschool, although it peaks during the middle school years and declines somewhat by the end of high school (e.g., Currie et al., 2012; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al., 2010). A recent Institute of Educational Studies report, based on a national sample of over 4,000 youth aged 12 to 18 years (DeVoe & Bauer, 2011), showed declines in victimization from 37% to 22% from Grade 6 to 12. Prevalence rates also vary across countries. In a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO; Currie et al., 2012), examining bullying and victimization among 10-, 13-, and 15-year-olds in 43 countries, rates of victim-

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ization varied from 2% to 32% across countries and rates of bullying varied from 1% to 36%.

Is bullying on the rise? Findings from the WHO survey (Currie et al., 2012) indicated an overall decline in peer victimization in most countries over previous years, although the decline was small, usually less than 10% (see also Rigby & Smith, 2011). In the United States, youth reports of physical bullying declined from 22% in 2003 to 15% in 2008 (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010), but online harassment increased from 6% in 2000 to 11% in 2010 (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013). Thus, although traditional forms of bullying may be declining, cyberbullying appears to be on the rise as access to technology becomes more ubiquitous.

How Stable Is Peer Victimization?

Peer victimization is often characterized as a rather stable experience (e.g., "Once a victim, always a victim"), but stability estimates vary as a function of time, age, and methodology. Teacher and peer reports show higher stability (e.g., r range = .5 to .7; Fox & Boulton, 2006; Hanish et al., 2004) than self-reports (e.g., r range = .2 to .4; Dhami, Hoglund, Leadbeater, & Boone, 2005; Fox & Boulton, 2006; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Generally, victimization is somewhat transient among younger children (e.g., Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002), but becomes moderately stable for middle elementary students, over both short intervals (4 to 5 months, Goodman, Stormshak, & Dishion, 2001; Ostrov, 2008) and across 1 or 2 years (Bellmore & Cillessen, 2006; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998; Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010), with 40% to 50% of students reporting consistent victimization (Beran, 2008; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, &

Chauhan, 2004). As time intervals increase, stability estimates decline, lending some hope for victimized students. Between Grades 2/3 and 7/8, 15% to 20% of students continue to be bullied (Kumpulainen, Räsänen, & Henttonen, 1999; Schafer, Korn, Brodbeck, Wolke, & Schultz, 2005), and Scholte, Engels, Overbeek, de Kemp, and Haselager (2007) found that 43% of 10- to 13-year-olds continued to be seen by peers as victims 3 years later. Across the longest interval examined to date, Sourander, Helstelä, Helenius, and Piha (2000) found that 12% of boys and 6% of girls were consistently bullied from age 8 to 16. For these youth, there seems little optimism for change. Research over the past few decades has documented links between victimization and a host of negative mental health, social, and academic outcomes (see Card, Isaacs, & Hodges, 2007; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Swearer, Espelage, et al., 2010; Swearer & Hymel, 2015, for reviews), with increasing evidence that victimization can "get under the skin," impacting neurobiological functioning (see Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2013). As part of this special issue, McDougall and Vaillancourt (2015) move beyond one-time, snapshot correlates to provide a critical analysis of research on the longitudinal impact of peer victimization over the years of childhood and adolescence, with a focus on how peer victimization during the school years plays out for adjustment in adulthood.

The Many Faces of Bullying

Bullying takes many forms, from direct physical harm (physical bullying); to verbal taunts and threats (verbal bullying); to exclusion, humiliation, and rumor-spreading (relational or social bullying); to electronic harassment using texts, e-mails, or online mediums (cyberbullying[1]). Although physical and cyberbullying are often of greatest concern, social and verbal bullying are the more common forms experienced by students. For example, Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al. (2010) found that 31% of Grade 4 through 12 students reported being physically bullied by peers and 12% reported being cyberbullied, whereas 51% and 37% reported being verbally and socially bullied, respectively. Students are often aware of rules prohibiting physical harm to others, but verbal and social bullying are more difficult to identify.

Adults rely on youth to report bullying, especially in its more covert forms, and classrooms in which students are more willing to report bullying are characterized by less, not more, victimization (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). Yet youth are reluctant to report bullying, given legitimate fears of negative repercussions or ineffective adult responses (see Oliver & Candappa, 2007). Positive relationships between teachers and students may enhance the likelihood of student reporting (e.g., Oliver & Candappa, 2007), but this relationship is not always observed (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014), and with age, students' willingness to report bullying declines steadily

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[1] See www.stopbullying.gov/what-is-bullying/definition/index.html for a more detailed description

(Aceves, Hinshaw, Mendoza-Denton, & Page-Gould, 2010; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008: Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Cortes and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2014) found that students were more likely to report bullying when they believed that teachers would respond actively by involving parents and/or separating the students involved, and less likely to report when they expected teachers to punish the perpetrator, presumably for fear of retaliation or ridicule.

Both boys and girls engage in all forms of bullying, but sex differences are also evident, the most consistent being boys' greater involvement in physical bullying (e.g., Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Cook et al., 2010). Some studies show higher rates of relational, verbal, and cyberbullying among girls (e.g., DeVoe & Bauer, 2011; Vaillancourt, Trinh, et al., 2010), but sex differences do not emerge in all studies (e.g., Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004; Marsh et al., 2011; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003). Future research is needed to understand the impact of these different forms of bullying, although a growing body of research suggests that cyberbullying is more distinct from traditional or face-to-face forms than originally thought (see Bauman, Cross, & Walker, 2013; Kowalski, Limber, & Agaston, 2012; Runions, Shapka, & Wright, 2013).

Different Types of Bullies

Over the past 40 years, stereotypes of bullies as socially incompetent youth who rely on physical coercion to resolve conflicts have diminished as studies document wide individual differences among children who bully. In his early research, Olweus (1978, 1993) distinguished between children who bully others and those who both bully others and are victimized. These "bully victims" have been characterized as hyperactive, impulsive, and as experiencing more peer rejection, more academic difficulties, and more stressful and harsh home environments (see Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001), but represent only a small portion (1% to 12%) of students (Dulmus et al., 2006; Nansel et al., 2001; Solberg & Olweus, 2003; Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007). Over the past four decades, research has also shown that many bullies are socially intelligent (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 2000; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999a, 1999b) and enjoy considerable status in the peer group (Vaillancourt et al., 2003), leading to distinctions between socially marginalized and socially integrated bullies (Farmer et al., 2010). Adults may be less able to recognize bullying perpetrated by students who appear to be socially competent, well-functioning individuals. Moreover, if bullying is viewed as a reflection of power and status in the peer group, it is difficult to convince students to abandon such behavior. In their review of our current understanding of bullying, Rodkin et al. (2015) critically evaluate evidence for various subtypes of bullies and explore the mechanisms and motivations underlying them.

Can We Effectively Address Bullying?

Given a growing body of evidence on the concurrent and long-term consequences of bullying for both bullies (see Rodkin et al., 2015) and victims (see McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015), considerable emphasis has been placed on finding the most effective ways to address bullying, clinically, legally, and educationally. This research is the focus of the three articles in this special issue. As research in psychology and neuroscience emphasize the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, context effects, and experiences with bullying and victimization, Swearer and Hymel (2015) explore the utility of a social-ecological, diathesis-stress model for understanding bullying as a systemic problem, with efforts to address bullying by impacting the contexts in which such behaviors occur. Cornell and Limber (2015) review current efforts to address bullying in the United States through legal and policy decisions and their implications. Finally, Bradshaw (2015) provides a critical analysis of research on how schools can best address the problem of bullying, reviewing evidence for the effectiveness of school-wide, universal antibullying programs.

Research over the past four decades on school bullying has contributed greatly to our understanding of the complexity of the problem as well as the challenges we face in addressing it. Although questions still outnumber answers, our hope is that this special issue serves as an impetus for further research on bullying as well as greater efforts to address the problem. In the words of one victimized youth,

In conclusion, there is no conclusion to what children who are bullied live with. They take it home with them at night. It lives inside them and eats away at them. It never ends. So neither should our struggle to end it. (Sarah, age 16)

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