

Essays on school bullying: Theoretical perspectives on a contemporary problem

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Reading the news, it is hard to ignore the issue of school bullying. School Bullying appears to be everywhere, as highlighted by the recent headlines *EXCLUSIVE: More than six in 10 people bullied at school according to Express.co.uk poll*¹ and *Annual Survey reveals surge in cyber-bullying inside our schools.*² While numerous research studies, surveys and polls have been conducted into the issue of school bullying in order to investigate prevalence rates, the individuals involved, the associated negative effects, and the (in) efficacy of anti-bullying programmes, there has been comparatively little theoretical discussion of the various factors that facilitate bullying beyond the individual level, the aggressive intentions of particular individuals, and the passive or active participation of other actors.

¹ Gutteridge, 2015.

² George, 2015.

This lack of theoretical discussion of the social, institutional, and societal factors involved in bullying is surprising when one considers that school bullying is not a particularly new phenomenon. Bullying was already a subject of debate in the mid-1800s following the publication of Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*.³ However, while some research was conducted into school bullying as early as 1885 in the United States, research into school bullying did not really get going until the late 1960s and early 1970s in the UK and Scandinavia.⁴ This research was afforded increased importance in 1982 following the suicides of three youths in the Norwegian town of Bergen, all of whom were believed to have been subjected to bullying.⁵ Despite important contributions to understandings of the social dynamics of school bullying in the UK and Sweden in the 1970s⁶, the research that was subsequently conducted in the UK and Scandinavia largely focused on the individuals involved and understood bullying as a form of interpersonal aggression, influenced by personal characteristics and family backgrounds.⁷

Research was also being conducted into school bullying (*ijime*) in Japan in the 1980s, and this research was given added impetus by the suicides of 16 school pupils in 1984 and 1985.⁸ While the focus of bullying work elsewhere was focused on the aggressive behaviour and characteristics of the particular individuals involved, the research being conducted in Japan was more focused on group dynamics and the institutional context

³ Hughes, 1857/2007; Smith, 2014.

⁴ Burk, 1897; Heinemann, 1972; Olweus, 1973; Laslett, 1977; Lowenstein, 1977.

⁵ Roland, 1989; Olweus, 1993.

⁶ Dale, 1971; Heinemann, 1972.

⁷ Duncan, 1999; Walton, 2005; Rivers and Duncan, 2013; Horton, 2014.

⁸ Yoneyama, 1999.

of the school.⁹ Through their work, Japanese researchers thus highlighted important oversights in more individual-focused school bullying research. However, the research being conducted into *ijime* in Japan appeared to have little impact on discussions surrounding school bullying, and while research gradually began to be conducted in other countries, it drew largely on the studies that had been conducted in northern Europe.

School bullying research is now being conducted in many parts of the world.¹⁰ Much of this research still tends to focus on the individuals involved in bullying at the expense of the social, institutional, and societal contexts within which it occurs. While these studies provide a great deal of information about the prevalence of school bullying, the individuals involved, and the harmful consequences of bullying, they have less to say about *why* it occurs.¹¹ Two Japanese researchers, Shoko Yoneyama and Asao Naito, in their article *Problems with the Paradigm: The school as a factor in understanding bullying (with special reference to Japan)*, pointed to these oversights more than a decade ago and called for more sociological perspectives and consideration of the importance of the "social structure of school itself".¹² Using the terminology later employed by Ian Rivers and Neil Duncan, Yoneyama and Naito were calling for a shift away from an "individual model" towards a more "collective model" that takes into consideration "systems, cultures and institutions".¹³

⁹ Yoneyama, 1999; Taki, 2001; Yoneyama and Naito, 2003.

¹⁰ Ohsako, 1997; Jimerson and Huai, 2010; Sittichai and Smith, 2015.

¹¹ Walton, 2011; Rivers and Duncan, 2013.

¹² Yoneyama and Naito, 2003, p. 328.

¹³ Rivers and Duncan, 2013, p. 4.

Recently there has been an increasingly noticeable shift away from the individual focus of “paradigm one” towards a more complex consideration of the social, institutional and societal aspects of bullying, or what is now being called “paradigm two”.¹⁴ The aim of this special issue is to further develop the theoretical underpinnings of this second paradigm by addressing the issue of school bullying from different theoretical perspectives in order to illuminate its social, institutional and societal aspects.

Towards this end, we invited researchers from a range of theoretical and geographical areas to engage in a more theoretically focused discussion about school bullying. In line with the overall aims of *Confero*¹⁵, authors were not restricted in terms of word count or structure, and were encouraged not to write empirically focused articles but rather to instead pen *theoretical essays* about school bullying, outlining how they understand bullying and the implications such understandings have for how we approach this contemporary problem.

We have been fortunate enough to gather together researchers whose essays highlight a broad range of perspectives on bullying and reflect the increasing diversity in thinking about this important contemporary problem.

In the first essay, *Bullying and the philosophy of shooting freaks*, Gerald Walton questions the effectiveness of anti-bullying initiatives and argues that attempts to reduce the prevalence of school bullying have failed, precisely because they have focused on the problem as a behavioural one rather than a

¹⁴ Schott and Søndergaard, 2014, p. 2.

¹⁵ Nylander, Aman, Hallqvist, Malmquist, and Sandberg, 2013.

broader social problem. Drawing parallels between popular culture and school bullying, Walton suggests that rather than continuing along the same path of conducting research into a problem that they think they largely understand, bullying researchers need to pull back and take some time to think about school bullying in relation to the broader context within which it occurs. Walton argues that rather than focusing on the behaviour of individuals, it is necessary to take the issue of social difference seriously, because at its core school bullying is about social difference. In doing so, he argues that it is necessary to consider the ways in which social power, privilege and disadvantage intersect and are allocated unequally. Walton's essay provides a good entry point for thinking about bullying beyond the individual level, and instead conducting more complex investigations of the social, institutional and societal levels wherein the individual interactions occur.

Dorte Marie Søndergaard also questions the effectiveness of anti-bullying initiatives, but from the perspective of victim positioning. In the second essay of the special issue, *The dilemmas of victim positioning*, she suggests that anti-bullying initiatives may even be counter-productive if they do not account for the social and cultural dynamics involved in bullying relations. Drawing on research conducted in Denmark, as well as the research of Ann-Carita Ewaldsson in Sweden and Bronwyn Davies in Australia, Søndergaard analyses the quite different experiences of three girls – two of whom are involved in bullying relations, while the third has been subjected to rape. In doing so, Søndergaard discusses three different levels at which negotiations of social reality take place: the level at which the person to be included or excluded is nominated; the level at which the criteria for such positioning are selected; and the level

at which inclusion and exclusion practices are reproduced. Discussing the experiences of the three girls in relation to these levels, Søndergaard provides insight into how children may be more or less able to influence these different levels, and also why many ‘victims’ may resist or even reject the position of ‘victim’.

In the third essay, *Posthuman performativity, gender and ‘school bullying’: Exploring the material-discursive intra-actions of skirts, hair, sluts, and poofs*, Jessica Ringrose and Victoria Rawlings re-visit examples from qualitative research conducted in the UK and Australia in order to rethink school bullying through a posthuman performativity lens. Drawing on the theories of Judith Butler and Karen Barad, Ringrose and Rawlings problematize the predominant focus on individual human agency and instead build upon socio-cultural approaches to school bullying by attributing agency to matter and the intra-actions of human and non-human agents, such as discourses, skirts, hair, makeup, looks, muscles, and sport. Ringrose and Rawlings question anti-bullying policies that have sought to address the use of injurious language through the banning of words, and instead illustrate the material forces that intra-act with such discourses. In doing so, Ringrose and Rawlings challenge researchers to consider the ways in which terms such as ‘slut’, ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘poof’ are materialised in context, and suggest that anti-bullying initiatives need to shift their focus away from the agency of individuals to the school policies that regulate and restrict such agency.

In the fourth and penultimate essay, *Theorizing school bullying: Insights from Japan*, Shoko Yoneyama addresses the fact that the frame of reference for bullying research has largely been

restricted to the global West. Focusing on the work that has been conducted in Japan, including that which has until now only been available in Japanese, Yoneyama seeks to integrate Japanese research with the 'second paradigm' of school bullying research. Rather than explaining Japanese school bullying in terms of cultural differences, Yoneyama considers mechanisms that are common to school bullying in Japan and the West. Yoneyama introduces a typology of school bullying that distinguishes between two types of bullying (Type I and Type II), which she argues correspond to the first and second paradigms of school bullying research. Focusing on Type II, Yoneyama considers the ways in which school bullying is intertwined with institutional aspects of schools, including the importance of hierarchy and group dynamics, and how bullying may represent a state of anomie in school communities that have become dysfunctional and may even provide students with a means of counteracting the alienation and disconnectedness that they experience at school. Focusing on the importance of the school context, Yoneyama suggests that future research not only needs to consider bullying in different socio-cultural contexts, but also alternative education systems.

Robert Thornberg rounds off this special issue on school bullying with a review-style essay entitled *The social dynamics of school bullying: The necessary dialogue between the blind men around the elephant and the possible meeting point at the social-ecological square*. In his essay, Thornberg argues that school bullying researchers need to engage in dialogue if they are to better understand the problem of school bullying. Focusing on researchers from the second paradigm, Thornberg likens them to the blind men around the elephant of bullying, whose perspectives of school bullying when taken alone only

allow for a partial understanding of the problem but when taken together, and together with researchers from the first paradigm, could enable a better understanding of the various individual and collective factors associated with school bullying. Thornberg firstly outlines a number of perspectives from the second paradigm, wherefrom researchers have understood bullying in terms of stigma and labelling processes, friendship and relationship building, social hierarchies, social dominance, likeability and popularity, power and power imbalance as situated and relational, disability gender and heterosexual hegemony, and moral order and intersectionality. In calling for a necessary dialogue between the blind men, Thornberg argues that the social-ecological framework provides the opportunity for the various theoretical perspectives to come together in addressing the *micro-*, *meso-*, *exo-*, and *macrosystems* of school bullying and hence the complex interplay of individual and contextual factors.

Taken together, the five essays that make up this special issue reflect the increasing diversity in thinking about bullying and offer a number of suggestions for how to move forward in our attempts to counter the issue of bullying in schools. They suggest that we need to take seriously the social, institutional, and societal aspects of school bullying by addressing the importance of social difference, group dynamics and positioning, discursive-material intra-action, the purpose of education, theoretical reflection, and academic dialogue. We hope that these essays provide a dialogical opening that promotes further theoretical discussions about school bullying and invite you as readers to take part in these deliberations in coming issues of *Confero*.

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