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

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Bullying has over the years been examined and explained in individual as well as in contextual terms, and from a wide range of different theories and methods. A growing number of bullying researchers approach bullying as a socially complex phenomenon and from social researchers approach bullying as a socially complex phenomenon and from social psychological and sociological perspectives. There is today a tension between theoretical perspectives on bullying, but also a need for investigating the social and contextual aspects of bullying further. In this article, I will argue for the necessity of dialogue between different theoretical perspectives and the inclusive potential of the social-ecological framework to create a meeting point of theories in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of school bullying.

The blind men around an elephant

Bullying has traditionally been defined as repeated inhumane actions directed at target individuals, who are disadvantaged or less powerful than those who repeatedly harass or attack them[305]. The international school bullying research field has its origin in developmental psychology and was initiated by the work of the Scandinavian psychologist Dan Olweus [306]. Developmental and educational psychology still dominates this field, even though the interest of school bullying has been growing among social psychologists, sociologists, social anthropologists, and philosophers[307]. Bullying is about power but there is an on-going debate among scholars about how to define and collect data on bullying[308]. Furthermore, even if we adopt the traditional definition, the term bullying still has multiple meanings and uses[309] because the definition and the meaning are due to the characteristics of languages, cultures, and contexts.

A growing number of bullying researchers approach bullying as a socially complex phenomenon and from social psychological and sociological perspectives. Some of them are challenging earlier and other contemporary perspectives. The situation is a bit like the metaphor of the six blind men around an elephant – a metaphor Thayer-Bacon[310] uses to approach the diversity

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[305] e.g., Espelage and Rue, 2012; Jimerson, Swearer and Espelage, 2010; Noels, 2012; Smith, 2014

[306] Olweus, 1973, 1978

[307] Schott and Søndergaard, 2014b; Thornberg, 2011

[308] e.g., Canty, Stubbe, Steers and Collings, in press; Carrera, DePalma and Lameiras, 2011; Duncan, 2013; Ellwood and Davies, 2010, 2014; Frånberg and Wrethander, 2011; Mitchell and Borg, 2013; Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Schott, 2014

[309] cf., Canty et al., in press

[310] Thayer-Bacon, 2001

within social and educational research. In this well-known poem, the six blind men examined an elephant from different positions and described it as either a rope, a tree, a fan, a snake, a wall, or a spear, depending upon which part of the elephant that each man touched. Thayer-Bacon[311] argues that knowers are fallible, that our knowledge and our criteria of its justification or plausibility are situated and socially constructed, and therefore corrigible and continually in need of critique and reconstruction. As Jackson[312] states, 'it is not a case of some having a clearer view than others, but rather that the social is many-faceted and what is seen from one angle may be obscured from another'. Hence, a crucial advice to the blind men is, Thayer-Bacon[313] states, to start talking to each other and share the information and conceptions they each had. 'Only by acting as a community of inquirers can they hope to gather a more complete understanding of elephants'[314].

Nevertheless, as Schott and Søndergaard state, 'this suggestion about the partiality of epistemological perspectives does *not* imply an add-on approach'[315] . I agree with this sentiment because a simple add-on approach would be similar to what Thayer-Bacon[316] conceptualised as vulgar relativism, which argues that it does not matter what one's perspective is, in relation to the elephant, for all perspectives are right ("true"). She contrasts this position with what she calls a *qualified relativism,* which (a) insists on the need for pluralism, i.e., a conversation between different perspectives in order to reach a

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[311] Thayer-Bacon, 2000, 2001, 2003a, 2003b
[312] Jackson, 2006, p. 106
[313] Thayer-Bacon, 2001
[314] Thayer-Bacon, 2001, p. 401
[315] Schott and Søndergaard, 2014a, p. 9
[316] Thayer-Bacon, 2001

more qualified understanding, (b) accepts fallibilism, i.e., that we can never attain knowledge that is certain because we are fallible, limited, and contextual beings, and (c) claims that knowledge is a cultural embedded social process of knowing that is continually in need of re/adjustment, correction, and re/construction.

> Qualified relativists insist that all inquiry (and the criteria and tools we use to help us inquire) are affected by philosophical assumptions which are culturally bound, and that all inquirers are situated knowers who are culturally bound as well. However, we can compensate for our cultural embed-dedness by opening our horizons and including others in our conversations. Pluralistically including others' perspectives in our inquirying process offers us the means for adjusting for our own limitations, correcting our standards and improving the warrants for our assertions, and recognizing the role of power and privilege in epistemological theories. Qualified relativists insist on the need for us to be pluralistic in our inquirying, both interms of considering the universe as open and unfinished, as well as in the sense of including others not like us necessarily in the inquirying process [317].

In accordance with qualified relativism, I do not reject individual explanations per se, but in this article I have chosen to review a selection of different approaches that view and analyse school bullying as social processes and dynamics (i.e., from the second paradigm or second-order perspective on bullying). I do so because scholars have recently drawn attention to the need of adopting more social psychological and sociological perspectives on bullying[318]. These are some of the "blind men" around the elephant of bullying that should be

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[317] Thayer-Bacon, 2003a, p. 418
[318] Migliaccio and Raskauskas, in press, Schott and Søndergaard, 2014b, Thornberg, 2011

engaged in a dialogue with each other as well as with other theoretical perspectives of bullying.

Stigma and labelling processes

Within *interactionist* and *social constructionist* frameworks, ethnographic and qualitative interview studies have demonstrated how target students in school bullying are socially defined, constituted or constructed as deviant, odd, or different in peer interactions and conversations [319]. For example, Thornberg[320] found that participants in bullying often used dehumanising and deviant-constituting labels like "moron", "ugly", "nerd", "retarded", "poor man's clothes", "disgusting", "stupid", "stinking", and "weird" to address the victims. In their discourse analysis, Teräsahjo and Salmivalli[321] identified "the odd student repertoire" performed by the students when they talked about the victims. Evaldsson and Svahn[322] revealed how girls who were reported as bullies justified their actions as ordinary and rational, and labelled the targeted peer as "a liar", "whore", and "fucking abnormal". Labels that constitute the target students as deviant are used in the peer group to normalise and justify bullying[323]. Such meaning-making and interaction patterns in bullying can be understood as *stigma* and *labelling* processes[324].

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[319] Adler and Adler, 1998, Evaldsson and Svahn, 2012, Merton, 1994, Kinney, 1993, Teräsahjo and Salmivalli, 2003, Thornberg, 2015; Thornberg, Halldin, Bolmsjö, and Petersson, 2013
[320] Thornberg, 2015
[321] Teräsahjo and Salmivalli, 2003
[322] Evaldsson and Svahn, 2012
[323] Evaldsson and Svahn, 2012, Lahelma, 2004, Teräsahjo and Salmivalli, 2003, Thornberg, 2015
[324] Merton, 1996, Thornberg, 2015, Thornberg et al., 2013

A label refers to a definition, and 'when applied to a person, it identifies or defines what type of a person he or she is'[325]. A label can be either "deviant" or "normal". When individuals are labelled as deviant, they are defined as people who violate important social taken-for-granted norms of the social group, culture or society. Phelan and Link[326] argued that stigma is the core concept for understanding the consequences of labelling. Thus, 'the peer discourse of bullying created social expectations that trapped the victims in a self-fulfilling prophecy. They became nothing more than their bullying-induced labels for the classmates'[327]. As a result of the stigma, other students who do not actively participate in bullying avoid the victims as a result of peer pressure and a fear of social contamination, whereas the victims become even more rejected and excluded from most of the school's social life[328]. The socially isolated students tend to be caught in a victim cycle from which they cannot easily escape, and their attempts to escape usually fail because of the social construction of their differentness produced and reproduced in everyday interaction[329].

Friendship and relationship building

Other researchers understand bullying as a result of children and adolescents' *friendship and relationship building*[330]. From a *sociocultural theoretical framework,* Wrethander[331] stated that

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[325] Phelan and Link, 1999, p. 140
[326] Phelan and Link, 1999
[327] Thornberg, 2015, p. 315
[328] Dixon, Smith and Jenks, 2004, Evans and Eder, 1993, Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008, Thornberg, 2015, Thornberg et al., 2013
[329] Adler and Adler, 1998, Evans and Eder, 1993, Kless, 1992, Merton, 1996, Thornberg, 2015
[330] e.g., Haavind, 2014, Svahn and Evaldsson, 2011, Wrethander, 2007
[331] Wrethander, 2007

inclusion and *exclusion* are core processes in students' on-going *relational work* in everyday school life. Their relational work is mainly about ordering the social life in school and creating and maintaining a peer culture. Their relationships can change, be disrupted, and come to an end. The relational work and membership in peer group are based on a *shared cultural knowledge* that includes social norms about "right" and "wrong" behaviours and expectations in different situations. If a student acts "wrongly", a conflict may arise and there is a risk that he or she will be negatively categorised and excluded from the group. A set of different harassments can be used in this excluding process.

With reference to her ethnographic study, Wrethander [332] claimed that excluding actions are always connected to including actions, i.e., to manifest or emphasise togetherness in a relationship or a peer group (e.g., a real best friend relationship). Students then exclude a particular student in order to communicate that he or she does not belong to the actual relationship or peer group. Excluding processes are used to manifest distance toward students when establishing or maintaining peer relationships.

Furthermore, Wrethander[333] argued that excluding actions can emerge in two different ways: (a) as a more or less temporary element in the relational work in order to establish or maintain friendships, or (b) as a permanent exclusion of particular students conducted by peer groups in order to strengthen their togetherness. In such systematic and harassing exclusion, the targeted students are constructed as deviant or odd. By being

[332] Wrethander, 2007
[333] Wrethander, 2007

excluded, they will not have the same opportunity to appropriate the shared cultural knowledge and the peer norms for everyday social interaction. Their poor social knowledge can then be used as a resource to make them seen as "wrong doers" and to have them make fools of themselves. This in turn reinforces the socially constructed portrayal of them as odd or deviant. Furthermore, indirect aggression or relational bullying (i.e., social exclusion and rumour-spreading) among girls as a means to establish, manifest, maintain, or challenge established friendship and peer group boundaries has attracted some researchers[334].

The idea of bullying as produced by friendship and relationship building can also be theoretically approached and analysed with symbolic interactionist and poststructuralist perspectives. For example, within a poststructural framework, Søndergaard[335] proposed the concept of *social exclusion anxiety* as a thinking technology to develop a deeper understanding of bullying. The concept is built on the assumption that human beings are existentially dependent on *social embeddedness*. Social exclusion anxiety arises when this need of social belonging becomes jeopardised or threatened. This anxiety is always present as a fear beneath the surface when people interact – the risk of being marginalised and excluded, which leads to a loss of dignity and in the worst case "social death". In school, children negotiate the conditions for inclusion but at the same time this process operates along with the possibility of exclusion[336]. Whereas inclusion is associated with *projects of dignity*, exclusion is associated with *contempt production*. In bullying

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[334] Goodwin, 2002, Owens, Shute and Slee, 2000, Svahn and Evaldsson, 2011, Swart and Bredekamp, 2009
[335] Søndergaard, 2012, 2014
[336] cf., Wrethander, 2007

practises, contempt production increases and becomes focused on the targeted child, who becomes dehumanised and under pressure to assume an abject position. "The child who is abjected performs this by being positioned as a target of contempt, hatred or other degrading assessments that work to confirm that, at any rate, 'we' are inside and accepted"[337]. Hence, the contempt production and the target of bullying can contribute to the cohesion of the peer group and provide temporary relief from their own social exclusion anxiety.

Social hierarchies

From sociological and social anthropological point of views and with reference to their ethnographic work, several scholars have argued that bullying and harassment can, at least in part, be understood and explained in relation to *school culture*[338]. MacDonald and Swart [339] stated that the school they investigated had a *conflicted culture* underlying bullying. The school culture was conflicted because an overriding *authoritarian culture* with conflicted power relations, hierarchical channels of communication, and autocratic structures and procedures undermined the school from implementing a more positive, collaborative, respectful, and democratic culture. A prevalent *culture of secrecy* ("do not tell") at the school also contributed to the prevalence of bullying, as well as having *intolerance for diversity* and a *culture of disrespect*. From a sociological perspective, Yoneyama and Naito[340], suggested that schools are a social

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[337] Søndergaard, 2014, p. 68
[338] Cadigan, 2002, Duncan, 1999, Horton, 2011, Kinney, 1993, MacDonald and Swart, 2004, Merton, 1994.
[339] 2004
[340] Yoneyama and Naito, 2003

institution based on hierarchical and authoritarian relationships. The authoritarian structures of schools include a 'blaming, punitive, and disciplinary approach based on the use of aggression, power, and control; as well as a hierarchical and competitive ethos (as against caring ethos) that has little room for vulnerability'[341].

Researchers that have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in schools and qualitative interviews with students have argued that *social hierarchies* among the students are generated or reinforced by *the strong emphasis on competition and hierarchies in the school culture*. Bullying is produced as a result of social processes of negotiations, competitions, and struggles within social hierarchies[342]. Whereas students who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy are the typical targets of bullying, those who are most active in bullying tend to have high social status. Those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, including the victims of bullying, are also socially defined or constructed as different, odd, deviant, or those who do not fit in and are given stigmatising labels[343].

The association between social hierarchy and bullying has also been found in quantitative studies. In these studies, "bullies" are usually those who are identified by their peers, as those who most often fit the description of the social role of the "bully" and victims are usually those who are identified by their peers as those who most often fit the description of the social role of

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[341] Yoneyama and Naito, 2003, p. 317
[342] Adler and Adler, 1998, Besag, 2006, Cadigan, 2002, Dixon et al., 2004, Duncan, 1999, Eder, Evans and Parker, 1995, Goodwin, 2002, Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008, Kinney, 1993, Kless, 1992, MacDonald and Swart, 2004, Merton, 1997, Phillips, 2003
[343] Adler and Adler, 1998, Cadigan, 2002, Dixon et al., 2004, Eder et al., 1995, Kinney, 1993, Kless, 1992

the "victim". Findings from these studies indicate that those who bully others have usually high social status[344] and several friends in school[345] . Moreover, high status students display a strong tendency of not being targets of bullying[346]. In contrast, victims are usually those with the fewest or no friends[347], those who spend most of their time at the playground in solitude[348], and those who have the lowest social status in their school classes[349]. In addition, whereas bullies tend to be popular, "bully/victims", i.e., students who are perceived as both bullies and victims at the same time, tend to be unpopular[350]. Bullying can be used as a strategy to increase students' popularity but not everyone who uses that strategy is successful[351].

Social dominance

According to the *social dominance theory[352]*, bullying is used as a strategy to establish and maintain social dominance, and groups are often organised in dominant hierarchies. Dominance is not an end in itself but a means to get prioritised access to resources that are valued for the group. Individuals use aggressive and agonistic strategies as well as prosocial and cooperative strategies in order to position themselves in the dominant hierarchy.

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[344] de Bruyn, Cillessen and Wissink, 2010, Reijntjes et al., 2013, Sentse, Kiuru, Veenstra and Salmivalli, 2014, Thunfors and Cornell, 2008
[345] Barboza et al., 2009
[346] Pellegrini, 2002, Pellegrini, Blatchford and Baines, 2002
[347] Pellegrini, Bartini and Brooks, 1999, Pellegrini and Long, 2002
[348] Boulton, 1999
[349] de Bruyn et al., 2010, Mouttapa et al., 2004
[350] Thunfors and Cornell, 2008
[351] cf., Dijkstra, Lindenberg and Veenstra, 2008
[352] Pellegrini, 2004, Pellegrini et al., 2010

According to this theory, bullying is not used because children are evil-minded or have a deficient social cognition, but to position themselves in school classes and peer groups. In order to be successful they need to be skilled socially rather than lack social competence. Aggressive children who lack social skills tend to be identified as bully/victims or provocative/aggressive victims at the lower end of the dominant hierarchy. Thus, the main intention of bullying is not to inflict harm in itself but rather instrumental and used in a calculated way.

In particular, individuals use aggression as well as cooperative means in new groups. Thus, bullying is used as an initial strategy to increase social dominance status, and then bullying decreases when the dominant hierarchy has been established. In support for this assumption, research has demonstrated how bullying increases during the transition from primary school to middle school when children's social groups are disrupted, and after a while it decreases again as social dominance is established in the school classes[353]. Bullying is a goal-directed behaviour, and reputation (social dominance) is the most commonly cited benefit of bullying, both to individuals and groups[354].

Likeability and popularity

Several researchers with an interest in social hierarchies or social statuses among children and adolescents make a conceptual distinction between *likeability* (other similar terms are *peer acceptance, peer preference* and *sociometric popularity*) and *popularity* (also known as *perceived popularity*). Whereas

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[353] Pellegrini, 2004, Pellegrini et al., 2002, Pellegrini et al., 2010
[354] Volk, Dane and Marini, 2014

likeability refers to the extent to which other peers like or appreciate a child, popularity refers to the extent to which other peers rate a child as socially dominant, powerful or in terms of social status[355]. De Bruyn et al. put it as 'being well liked by peers… measured by asking adolescents who they like or prefer as play partner or friend' versus 'visibility, prestige, or dominance… measured by asking adolescents who they see as popular in their peer group'[356].

This distinction seems to shed new light on the relationship between popularity and bullying. Studies indicate that bullies tend to have high popularity but low likeability[357]. In contrast, students who are used to taking the defender role in bullying tend to be rated high in both popularity and likeability by their classmates[358]. Victims in turn appear to score low on measures of both likeability and popularity[359].

In addition, Witvliet et al.[360] found that bullying was also positively associated with popularity and negatively associated with likeability between peer groups. In other words, peer groups that engage in frequent bullying tended to score high in popularity and low in likeability, which in turn might reflect social dominant hierarchies of peer groups, in which bullying is used by a peer group as a tactic to establish, enhance, manifest, or maintain its social dominant position.

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[355] e.g., Asher and McDonald, 2009, Cillessen and Mayeux, 2004, Hymel, Closson, Caravita and Vaillancourt, 2011
[356] De Bruyn et al, 2010, p. 544
[357] Caravita and Cillessen, 2012, Caravita, Blasio and Salmivalli, 2009, 2010, de Bruyn et al., 2010, Sentse et al., 2014
[358] Caravita et al., 2009, 2010, Pöyhönen, Juvonen and Salmivalli, 2010
[359] de Bruyn et al., 2010, Prinstein and Cillessen, 2003
[360] Witvliet et al, 2010

Power and power imbalance as situated and relational

In addition to findings which show that long-term bully victims are usually at the bottom of the social hierarchy, some ethnographic studies have found that more temporary or short-term bullying can emerge and are prone to victimise (a) certain middle status students when they try to reach acceptance and become members of high status groups but instead become subject to the border work and excluding mechanisms of the high status group, and (b) certain high status students as a result of power and status negotiations and struggles within high status groups [361]. Thus, bullying can be examined and understood in terms of *social positioning* within larger peer groups such as crowds and school classes, as well as between and within minor peer groups such as cliques and friendship groups. Thus, the terms "bullies" and "victims" might be adequate to describe stable roles in long-term bullying. At the same time, it is important to recognise that these very common terms risk portraying a rather static picture of the social dynamics of bullying and peer group processes, as well as labelling and stigmatizing those involved. Although researchers use them in research reports, it would be very inappropriate to use them in the everyday anti-bullying work in schools.

Power imbalance or asymmetry, which is one of the criteria in the traditional definition of bullying, could be understood as *situated* and *relational*. In other words, constituted and manifested in everyday social interactions in children's positioning and relational work, rather than personal and

[361] Adler and Adler, 1998, Besag, 2006, Duncan, 1999, Eder et al., 1995, Merton, 1997

located in individuals. From a range of social theories, such as symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and poststructuralism, power is understood as *fluent*. In the field of school bullying, this might be more obvious in temporary or short-term bullying, but also in so-called "bully/victim" cases in which certain students are both bullying others and being bullied by others at the same time, and when students assume different roles ("pure victim", "pure bully", "provocative-victim", and "bystander") in different contexts as well as when they change roles within or between episodes[362]. Although power is situated, relational and fluent, it could nevertheless appear as more stable over time as a result of an established pattern of social interactions, which is the case in long-term bullying[363]. An unwillingness to recognize long-term bullying would be devastating, particularly to those kids who are victimized. Theoretical frameworks like symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and poststructuralism offer us theoretical lenses to examine and understand both power change and power stability in everyday interactions. Furthermore, a lot of studies emphasise the association between bullying and social categories, which highlights the macro aspects of bullying. Here I will focus on disability, gender, and heteronormativity, and by that, the need to include cultural norms and hegemonies in a theoretical understanding of school bullying.

Disability, gender and heterosexual hegemony

Several studies have found that members of certain social categories are overrepresented as victims of school bullying.

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[362] see Gumpel, Zioni-Koren and Bekerman, 2014
[363] cf., Thornberg, 2015

Children and adolescents with disabilities and special education needs are at a higher risk of being bullied[364].

For instance, students with stammers and other speech-language impairment [365], clumsiness or poor motor skills [366] hearing impairment [367], Tourette syndrome and other chronic tic disorders[368], and neuropsychiatric diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorders [369] and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD)[370] are more often bullied than their peers. Dixon et al.[371] examined a secondary school which included both mainstream students and students with hearing loss. They described how students who were hearing impaired tended to be categorised as different by their peers and they had a low social status. They became stigmatised and socially excluded in relation to the mainstream students. As a sub-group, the students with hearing loss were largely treated as members of a low status outgroup, and thus socially marginalised in school. As a result of their hearing disability, they were treated as

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[364] Annerbäck, Sahlqvist and Wingren, 2014, Christensen, Fraynt, Neece and Baker, 2012, Luciano and Savage, 2007, McGee, 2013, Nabuzoka, 2003, Norwich and Kelly, 2004, Sentenac et al., 2012, Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker and Frerichs, 2012, Twyman et al., 2010, for reviews, see Sentenac et al., 2012, Rose, 2011, Rose, Monda-Amaysa and Espelage, 2011

[365] Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok and Benz, 2012, Davis, Howell and Cooke, 2002, Erickson and Block, 2013

[366] Bejerot and Humble, 2013, Bejerot, Plenty, Humble and Humble, 2013, Campbell, Missiuna and Vaillancourt, 2012

[367] Blake et al., 2012

[368] Zinner, Conelea, Glew, Woods and Budman, 2012

[369] Blake et al., 2012, Kloosterman, Kelley, Parker and Javier, 2013, Zablotsky, Bradshaw, Anderson and Law, 2014, for recent reviews, see Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler and Weiss, 2014, Sreckovic, Brunsting and Able, 2014

[370] Fite, Evans, Cooley and Rubens, 2014, Holmberg and Hjern, 2008, McNamara et al., 2005, Taylor, Saylor, Twyman and Macias, 2010, Unnever and Cornell, 2003, Wiener and Mak, 2009

[371] Dixon et al, 2004

second class citizens, which in turn could lead to denigration and actual bullying.

Furthermore, several studies have shown how bullying and harassment as well as status, power and popularity among students can be produced and maintained by gender norms and patriarchal or gendered power structures or discourses[372], and by heterosexual hegemony or heteronormativity[373].

According to research, students who transgress established socio-cultural gender norms are at a higher risk of being victims of bullying and harassment[374]. Even though these studies give us important insights of the prevalence and correlations, they do not help us to understand the variation within and overlaps between different gender groups, and how gender norms might interact with other cultural norms and social categories.

Considering the issue of sexuality, several studies have found that students who identify themselves with another sexual orientation than hegemonic heterosexuality are more often bullied than peers who are heterosexual[375]. For example, Rivers and Cowie[376] found that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students' experiences of victimisation at school were both long-

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[372] Adler and Adler, 1998, Duncan, 1999, Duncan and Owens, 2011, Eder et al., 1995, Evans and Eder, 1993, Kless, 1992, Lahelma, 2004, Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman, 2003, Stoudth, 2006
[373] Cadigan, 2002, Duncan, 1999, Duncan and Owens, 2011, Eder et al., 1995, Evans and Eder, 1993, Lahelma, 2004, Phoenix et al., 2003, Ringrose, 2008
[374] Aspenlieder, Buchanan, McDougall and Sippola, 2009, Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr and Sites, 2006, Lee and Troop-Gordon, 2011, Young and Sweeting, 2004
[375] Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman and Austin, 2010, Birkett, Espelage and Koenig, 2009, McGee, 2013, Toomey, McGuire and Rusell, 2012, for reviews, see Hong and Garbarino, 2012, Poteat, Mereish, Digiovanni and Scheer, 2013
[376] Rivers and Cowie, 2006

term and systematic, and conducted by groups rather than by individuals. Moreover, although lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students are peer victimised more often than heterosexual students, homosexual epithets are often used in bullying targeting heterosexual students, particularly among boys and when they are perceived as gender non-conformed[377].

In addition, the relationship between heteronormativity and gender norms has been theoretically and empirically examined [378], particularly from interactionist sociology and poststructural feminist perspectives. For example, with reference to Judith Butler, Renold[379] argued that gender is routinely produced in everyday interactions through a heterosexual matrix in which hegemonic prescriptions of masculinity and femininity are embedded within a taken-for-granted hegemonic heterosexuality. Empirically, D'Augelli et al.[380] found that LGB youths who reported childhood gender atypicality considering themselves also reported significantly more verbally and physically sexual-oriented victimisation during their lifetime than LGB youths who did not report childhood gender atypicality. All these studies draw attention to the importance of including the macro level with its normative orders and power structures in relation to the constructed social categories in the culture or society when theorizing about bullying

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[377] see Poteat et al., 2013
[378] e.g., D'Augelli, Grossman and Starks, 2006, Duncan and Owens, 2011, Eder et al., 1995, Jackson, 2006, Meyer, 2008, Renold, 2006
[379] Renold, 2006
[380] D'Augelli et al, 2006

Moral order and intersectionality

According to Ellwood and Davies[381], children are engaged in *category-maintenance work*, which often includes aggressive and punitive behaviour towards others who disrupt already established binary categories such as male and female[382]. Hence, bullying among children in school takes place to maintain the *moral order*, such as gender norms and heteronormativity.

> The classic bully is a powerful figure on the playground: someone who is admired and feared, and who functions to maintain social and moral order through aggressive behaviour towards those who fail to meet certain norms – either the moral ethos of the school or something else that is (randomly) being defined as correct 'in group' behaviour within the peer group… Far from being disliked, marginal and socially unskilled, the classic bully may be popular, due to his/her knowledge of how the dominant social order works, and powerful in his/her insistence that others conform to it[383].

Ellwood and Davies contrast the classic bully with the "sad bully" who lacks these social skills and characteristics, and stands outside the common social and moral order (cf., the distinction between the successful and unsuccessful bullies when considering popularity and social positions in the social dominance hierarchy as discussed earlier). The classic bullies here are viewed as guardians of the moral order[384]. When categorical differences and the relations of power between different categories become fixed, the moral order is clearly related to the power asymmetry in bullying situations, which

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[381] Ellwood and Davies, 2010, 2014
[382] also see Davies, 2011
[383] Ellwood and Davies, 2014, p. 92
[384] Davies, 2011

'give power to those who engage in the unreflected, unoriginal repetition of the conventional, normative moral order… [and] deprives the one who rebels, attempting to resist and disrupt it'[385]. Bullying helps constitute the moral order in the ordinary everyday world.

The power imbalance in bullying of this kind is therefore not limited to the interpersonal relations between the bullies and the victim. Rather it is an expression of one or more power structures within a culture or a society that produce both "deviant", subordinate and excluded social categories as well as "normal", superior and included social categories. In order to pay attention to multiple identities and oppressions, some researchers in the field of bullying take advantage of the concept *intersectionality* [386], which aims to explore these multiple oppressions and identities. They reveal how power, harassment and oppression are produced when they intersect different social categories such as gender, ethnicity, social class, disability/ability, sexuality, age, religion etc. Social categories such as women, children, Muslims, transsexual or Swedish are not homogenous categories because members of a certain social category are at the same time members of a variety of other social categories. The intersectional perspective emphasises that there is not just one power structure but many power structures that interact with each other. Therefore, certain students belonging to a certain "deviant" or subordinate social category might be bullied whereas other students in the same "deviant" or subordinate social category are not bullied due to their membership in other social categories.

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[385] Davies, 2011, p. 283
[386] e.g., Loutzenheiser, 2015; Pritchard, 2013

Social-ecological framework

Symbolic interactionism and poststructuralism are two prominent theoretical traditions within the second-order perspective on bullying. Whereas the first-order perspective refers to theories explaining bullying in individual terms, such as individual dysfunctions, traits and intentions, the second-order perspective refers to theories explaining bullying as part of social processes contextualised in the particular situation[387]. Despite the theoretical strengths and sensitivity considering everyday life, meaning-making, and social interactional patterns at the micro level, symbolic interactionism has sometimes been criticized for lacking adequate theoretical understanding of social structure or the macro level [388] . Although the poststructural framework has contributed with crucial theoretical tools in order to examine and understand bullying by drawing attention to discourses, discursive practices, hegemonies, ideologies, power relations, normative moral orders, and intersectionality, it might be criticised for downplaying, underestimating or ignoring individual factors such as genes, neurobiological structures and processes, psychological traits, and intra-psychological processes, because of a theoretical unwillingness to address these possible components.

On the other hand, all theories can be accused of reductionism such as biological reductionism, psychological reductionism, linguistic/discursive reductionism, and sociological reductionism, including micro reductionism and macro reductionism. This is not at all surprising since the business of

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[387] Kousholt and Fisker, in press, Schott and Søndergaard, 2014a
[388] e.g., Kuhn, 1964

theory is to simplify complexities in order to generate coherent accounts for understanding, explaining, predicting or changing things embedded in a messy world. Anyway, a promising theoretical perspective that is gaining ground within the bullying research is the *social-ecological framework*[389] with roots in Bronfenbenner's ecological model of human development[390]. In contrast to the poststructural framework, it does not reject or deny but includes individual factors such as neurobiological components, psychological traits and intra-psychological processes in addition to contextual factors to better understand social development, actions and processes. A dialogue between different "blind men" around the elephant is thus inbuilt in this theoretical framework: positions oriented toward individual explanations and positions oriented toward contextual explanations.

Social-ecological theory states that bullying has to be understood as a social phenomenon that is established and perpetuated over time as the result of the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors. It is a complex phenomenon, with multiple and interactive causal factors and multiple outcomes. The individual characteristics of children interact with environmental contexts to promote or prevent bullying and victimisation. The *microsystem* is a system that individuals have direct contact with. For children, this includes peers, family, schools, and community/neighbourhood. *Mesosystem* refers to the interaction or interrelation between components of different microsystems. This includes the interrelations between the family and school, or between the parent-child relationship and the child's peer group. *Exosystem*

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[389] Espelage, 2014, Espelage and Swearer, 2004, 2011, Hong and Espelage, 2012
[390] Bronfenbenner, 1979

refers to the environment beyond the immediate microsystem, which can still influence the processes within the microsystem. Examples would be teachers' and other peers' home situations, and the teachers' previous teacher training programme as well as present opportunities of further training and professional support. *Macrosystem* refers to culture, society, social categories, power structures across different social groups, ideologies, cultural norms, etc., which influence the social structures, processes and activities that occur in the immediate system levels. For example, the macrosystem is associated with inequality, alienation, discrimination, and oppression in relation to ethnicity, gender, socio-economical position, disability, religion, age, appearance, and sexual orientation.

Although the social-ecological framework is promising and theoretically powerful, it has attracted some criticism. Carrera et al. criticise the social-ecological framework and its application to bullying as continuously operating 'alongside the existing reductionist and dualistic model without displacing it'[391], and by largely focusing upon microsystems (school, family, neighbourhood) rather than macrosystems such as social and cultural norms and expectations involved in issues such as gender socialization. Nevertheless, from a theoretical point-of-view, the social-ecological model includes micro-, meso-, exo-, *and* macrosystems as well as changes over time[392]. In fact, recent bullying research and reviews within this framework have indeed included and shown a growing interest of the macrosystems by examining gender norms and

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[391] Carrera et al, 2011, p. 489
[392] Espelage, 2014, Espelage and Swearer, 2011, Hong and Espelage, 2012

heteronormativity [393] among other social categories, normativities, and power relations at macro level. This movement opens up for a possible dialogue between the social-ecological framework and poststructural perspectives on gender, heteronormativity, and intersectionality.

Moreover, in a recent theoretical development called the modified ecological model, the social-ecological theory has been integrated with symbolic interactionism [394] and sociology of childhood [395]. The modified ecological model has a clear sociological perspective and emphasises "negotiated order" that relies on each level of the system. This theoretical approach views children as active social agents in the development of their own culture as well as in the continuance, or even challenge of the larger culture. Power derives from multiple sources. It is not solely decided by cultural determinants. Although it is reflected by what is important in the larger culture, individuals do not have power unless acknowledged by others through social interactions. Power is produced and reproduced through social relations. The modified ecological model acknowledges and embraces both agency and structure.

> Bullying is larger than just the relationship between bully and victim. That relationship is embedded within layers of social forces that create the culture that generates the opportunity for bullying to occur. These social forces work together to produce, and reproduce a bullying culture by defining and maintaining paths to power among students. Therefore, it is important to consider these layers, both in comprehension of bullying and

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[393] e.g., Birkett and Espelage, 2015, Birkett et al., 2009, Hong, Espelage and Kral, 2011, Hong and Garbarino, 2012, Poteat and Rivers, 2010, Robinson and Espelage, 2012, Varjas et al., 2008
[394] Migliaccio and Raskauskas, in press
[395] Migliaccio, 2015

the development of prevention or intervention for bullying, and how power exists throughout the entirety of the system[396].

The work of Migliaccio and Raskauskas demonstrates the potential of a theoretical dialogue between social-ecological framework and symbolic interactionism, including the sociology of childhood. As all other theories, social-ecological theory is partial, fallible, provisional, and modifiable. In one way, it is just one possible position among others around the elephant. Nevertheless, because it comprises individual and contextual factors, and acknowledges the complex interplay between factors within and between micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, and thus the intersectionality between social categories, cultural norms, and power relations, the social-ecological framework might have the theoretical power to create a meeting point of and a dialogue between a broad range of theoretical perspectives focusing upon different layers or factors in order to understand or explain bullying, including an urgent dialogue between the first- and second-order perspectives on bullying. I strongly agree with Kausholt and Fisker (in press) that bullying cannot adequately be understood from an individualistic (first-order) perspective. At the same time, bullying cannot adequately be understood from a discursive perspective, an interactionist perspective, an intersectionality perspective, or a social structural perspective. That would bring us back to the blind men around the elephant and a lack of dialogue.

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[396] Migliaccio and Raskauskas, in press

Conclusions

Thayer-Bacon argues that epistemological fallibilism, defined as the belief in the impossibility of attaining knowledge that is certain, entails "the need to embrace pluralism in the sense of including others, outsider views, in the inquiry process" [397]. She makes this argument both on moral grounds (it is morally wrong to exclude others) and on epistemological grounds.

> If we are relational social beings who are fallible and limited by our own embeddedness and embodiment, at a micro level as well as a macro level, then none of us can claim privileged agency. None of us has a God's eye view of Truth. Our only hope for overcoming our own individual limitations, as well as our social/political limitations (cultural and institutional) is by working together with others not like us who can help us recognize our own limitations /---/ Given our fallibilism, then we must embrace the value of inclusion on epistemic grounds in order to have any hopes of continually improving our understandings. Inclusion of others' perspectives in our debates and discussions allows us the means for correcting our standards, and improving the warrants for our assertions. [398]

In a curious, open-minded and honest discussion in which all parties actively listen to each other and make serious efforts to try to understand the perspectives of others, the second-order perspective can indeed challenge the first-order perspective, as suggested by Schott and Søndergaard[399] and demonstrated in

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[397] Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p. 4
[398] Thayer-Bacon, 2000, p. 11, 12
[399] Schott and Søndergaard, 2014a

the literature[400]. At the same time, the second-order perspective has to be open to challenges by the first-order perspective (as well as by a possible third-order perspective in the future). Although the social-ecological framework is provisional, partial, and fallible (in line with all other theories), it embraces both the first- and the second-order perspectives, and is therefore suggested here as a possible meeting space for a dialogue between them as well as within them. I do not view the social-ecological theory as the Truth or the unified theory of school bullying but as an invitation to theoretically and empirically embrace the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors. A serious theoretical dialogue like this would very likely challenge and revise the social-ecological framework, which for example the work of Migliaccio and Raskauskas[401] implies. The main concern of theoretical development and empirical investigations should be to examine bullying as an open, ambiguous, complex, and multifaceted concept and phenomenon in order to refine, challenge, and revise theoretical perspectives, to develop a more qualified yet provisional understanding of the complexity of school bullying, and to generate, challenge, revise, and improve tools to act upon school bullying in more qualified ways.

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[400] e.g., Canty et al., in press, Ellwood and Davies, 2010, Frånberg and Wrethander, 2011, Kousholt and Fisker, in press, Mitchell and Borg, 2013, Ringrose and Renold, 2010, Schott and Søndergaard, 2014b

[401] Migliaccio and Raskauskas, in press, Migliaccio, 2015

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