

Unpacking the bullying doll: Reflections from a fieldwork at the social-ecological square¹

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In April 2014, *Confero* announced a special issue titled *Essays on school bullying: Theoretical perspectives on a contemporary problem*, which aimed to stimulate a theoretical discussion about school bullying through the medium of theoretically focused essays.² No clipboards, no questionnaire surveys, no field notes, no recording devices, simply grey matter and a blank canvas upon which school bullying researchers could sketch their musings. Six researchers accepted the challenge and participated in a fruitful exchange of ideas, taking up issues as broad ranging as popular culture and social difference, victim positioning and exclusionary processes, discursive-material intra-action and the agency of skirts, institutional hierarchy and alternative forms of education, and qualified relativism and the interpretation of elephants.³ The final essay in the collection extended an invitation to a group of proverbial “blind men” to meet and discuss their interpretations

¹ This is a fictional fieldwork, as the social-ecological square was used by Thornberg (2015) as a means of visualizing a potential common ground for researchers, i.e. the social-ecological model.

² Horton and Forsberg, 2015.

³ Ringrose and Rawlings, 2015; Søndergaard, 2015; Thornberg, 2015; Walton, 2015; Yoneyama, 2015.

of the bullying elephant at a place the author called “the social-ecological square”.⁴

Seeing this as a chance to engage in a cross-paradigmatic discussion of school bullying, I packed my field notebook into my bag and headed out of the department’s main door, off in search of the aforementioned square. Walking in the direction of town, I noticed a sign pointing down a somewhat hidden lane that was overgrown with vegetation. The sign read *Ecological Lane*. The lane was narrow and the ground uneven, but I followed it anyway, in the hope that it would lead somewhere more social. After a long walk, I came upon a large square. The square was fenced off, sealed off in a heuristic sense, accessible via a small gated entrance. Above the gate a sign read *The Social-Ecological Square*. Opening the gate, I entered from the west side of the square.

The scene that greeted me upon entering the square was surprisingly different to that which I had expected. There was no elephant. The square was deserted.

Looking around, I could see that there were two other entrances; one gated entrance at the southern end of the square and one open entrance on the opposite side of the square to where I was standing. The eastern entrance led out to a large parking lot, where a few old cars were parked. The square was unkempt, with weeds growing through the numerous cracks in the concrete. At the northern end of the square there was a wooden park bench, worn from years of exposure to the elements. I walked over to the bench and sat down. As I was taking my notebook out of my bag, I heard the gate to the southern entrance being swung open.

A man dressed in a white lab coat entered the square pulling a large trolley behind him. On the trolley, there was a life-size

⁴ Thornberg, 2015.

wooden doll painted in bold primary colours. It reminded me of the Trojan horse from Virgil's *Aeneid*; so much so that I began to wonder what might be hidden inside. The man wheeled the trolley to the centre of the square and lifted the doll down onto the concrete. I opened my notebook and started to write down what I was observing. I watched as the man struggled to twist off the top half of the doll. After a great deal of twisting back and forth, there was a loud creaking sound and the top half of the doll was removed to reveal another, slightly smaller, doll hidden within it. The man lifted out the inner doll and placed it about two metres to the right of the larger doll, the top half of which he then refitted. Two dolls, one slightly smaller than the other.

Focusing on the smaller doll, the man repeated the process until once again a smaller doll was revealed. I sat and watched this process until eventually there were five dolls lined up in the centre of the square. Making sure that the distance was equal between all of the dolls and that they were facing the same way, the man collected the now empty trolley and wheeled it back out the entrance from whence he had come.

I looked at the dolls. Five dolls, each differing slightly in size, lined up from largest to smallest in the middle of the square.

As if on cue, a large bus pulled into the parking lot at the eastern entrance. A large number of researchers of varying academic status disembarked from the bus and made their way excitedly into the square and over to where the dolls were lined up. The researchers each took up a position next to one of the dolls. There was one researcher at each of the largest three dolls, three researchers at the second smallest doll, and a large group of researchers at the smallest doll. Curious as to why the smallest doll had attracted so much attention, and keen to get a closer look at the dolls, I gathered up my things, walked across the square, and introduced myself to the researchers.

Doll 1: The individual

After introducing themselves, the researchers invited me to ask any questions I might have about the doll. I looked at the doll. It was the smallest of the five. It resembled an ordinary school child of undefined gender. I asked the researchers to tell me about the doll. They explained that it is a “bully”. A school child who takes the initiative and, either directly or indirectly, engages in “repeated acts of aggression intended to cause physical or psychological harm to a peer who cannot adequately defend against such attacks as a result of a power difference.”⁵ There appeared to be general agreement amongst the researchers that boys are more involved in bullying, and that boys tend to bully directly, while girls tend to bully indirectly.⁶ I wondered why it was that boys were more inclined to engage in bullying, and particularly physical bullying, and also how the researchers knew so much about the intention behind the acts. Surely not all those who engage in bullying seek to cause physical or psychological harm?⁷

I noted down my questions in my notebook and listened as the researchers talked about the particular acts of aggression that constitute bullying. According to the researchers, such acts of aggression take the form of “pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking ... restraining another ... teasing, taunting, threatening, calling names ... spreading a rumour ... or attempts to cause fear, discomfort, or injury upon another person.”⁸ The list of aggressive acts was long, and I wondered if they should all be considered bullying.

⁵ Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr and Collen, 2014, p. 158.

⁶ Barboza, Schiamberg, Oehmke, Korzeniewski, Post and Heraux, 2009; Espelage, 2014; Espelage, Hong, Rao and Thornberg, 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong and Garbarino, 2012; Huang, Hong and Espelage, 2013; Lim and Hoot, 2015; Nickerson et al., 2014; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt and Hymel, 2010.

⁷ Horton, Kvist Lindholm and Nguyen, 2015.

⁸ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 312.

As I was noting this question down, a researcher standing to my right explained that it is important to remember that children who have been bullied are more likely to bully others, and it is thus important to not only focus on the “bully” but also the “victim”.⁹ She explained that a ‘victim’ is a school child who has been subjected to bullying by one or more of her peers and that there are a number of predictors of bullying behaviour, including age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, obesity, disability, learning ability, impulsiveness, depression, anxiety, intelligence, and socio-economic status.¹⁰ I looked at the doll and pondered the idea that the victim may have been a young, impulsive, slightly depressed, overweight, bisexual, ethnic minority boy with a diagnosed learning disability from a low-income community.

Regardless of their social position, the researcher assured me, “victims” most likely suffer from “psychosocial problems, such as depression and anxiety.”¹¹ Noticing the perplexed look on my face, she elaborated that anxiety and depression can be both contributing factors and consequences of school bullying. As she put it, “our understanding of the psychology of bullying/victimization is much like the ‘chicken or egg’ conundrum.”¹²

When I asked whether any school children are not characterised as either a ‘bully’ or a ‘victim’, a number of the researchers explained that in order to get a complete picture, it is not enough to focus on the individuals involved, but rather I need to understand the various *systems* within which the bullying behaviour occurs. They explained that the behaviour of an individual needs to be understood in terms of the social-

⁹ Barboza et al., 2009.

¹⁰ Espelage and Swearer, 2010; Espelage et al., 2010; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Huang et al., 2013; Swearer et al., 2010.

¹¹ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 315.

¹² Swearer and Hymel, 2015, p. 346.

ecological environment within which it occurs.¹³ This social-ecological environment is made up of numerous systems, each located within another like a set of Russian nesting dolls.¹⁴ Pointing along the line of dolls, one of the researchers explained that the next doll in the line was the *microsystem*, the third one the *mesosystem*, the fourth one the *exosystem*, and the fifth one, the one from which the others came, the *macrosystem*. Following his advice, I gradually worked my way from doll to doll, from the microsystem to the macrosystem.

Doll 2: The microsystem

There were three researchers standing at the second doll. As I approached, one of the researchers shook my hand and introduced me to the other two. She then explained that much of the research into school bullying has not adequately accounted for the broader social context, and it is therefore important to consider the microsystems within which individuals and groups of individuals interact.¹⁵ As she put it:

The most direct influences in bullying behaviour among youth are within the microsystem, which is composed of individuals or groups of individuals within immediate settings (e.g., home, school) with whom youth have interactions.¹⁶

From her explanation, I gathered that the microsystem is where proximal processes of development occur, and hence where, through interactions with others, children develop their behavioural characteristics. When I asked whether she could give me an example of a microsystem relevant to school

¹³ Espelage, 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Lim and Hoot, 2015; Patton, Hong, Williams and Allen-Meares, 2013; Swearer and Doll, 2001; Swearer Napolitano and Espelage, 2011; Thornberg, 2015.

¹⁴ Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Patton et al., 2013; Rodkin and Hodges, 2003; Swearer et al., 2010.

¹⁵ Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage, Holt and Henkel, 2003.

¹⁶ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 315.

bullying, she replied that each of the three researchers would provide me with an example and that she would begin with the example of the family.

In elaborating the example of the family, she told me that family plays a crucial role, as interactions in the family may detrimentally influence the ways in which children interact with their peers and hence the extent to which they are involved in bullying interactions as either ‘bullies’ or ‘victims’. She provided a number of examples of interactions in the family, including those that occur between parents (or other caregivers), parents and children, parents and siblings, and siblings. She elaborated that factors relevant to school bullying within the microsystem of the family thus include lack of parental involvement, lack of parental support, negative family interactions, child maltreatment, and inter-parental violence.¹⁷ Emphasising lack of parental involvement and support, she stated that “Bullies tend to have parents who do not provide adequate supervision or are not actively involved in the lives of their children”.¹⁸

The second researcher then provided a second example of a microsystem: the peer group. As he explained, bullying rarely involves only the child doing the bullying and the one being bullied, but occurs in the presence of peers, who can either encourage or prevent bullying interactions.¹⁹ Such peers are referred to as ‘bystanders’. When I asked him what he meant by ‘bystanders’, and how they differed from ‘bullies’ or ‘victims’, he explained that ‘bystanders’ are “neither ‘pure bullies’ nor ‘pure victims’” but rather a ‘bystander’ is a “viewer, observer,

¹⁷ Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage, 2014; Espelage and Swearer, 2010; Espelage et al., 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong and Garbarino, 2012; Hong et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2013; Swearer and Doll, 2001; Swearer and Hymel, 2015.

¹⁸ Espelage, 2014, p. 259.

¹⁹ Espelage, 2014; Nickerson et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2013; Rodkin and Hodges, 2003; Swearer and Doll, 2001; Swearer and Hymel, 2015.

witness, and passerby.”²⁰ He elaborated by saying that ‘bystanders’ play a key role in a bullying situation by observing the bullying without intervening and that ‘bystanders’ actually “enjoy watching fights, often encouraging the bully. They also help the bully by warning them if an adult is coming.”²¹ However, he was also careful to point out that some ‘bystanders’ may also sympathise with the ‘victim’, may not get involved and may even try to stop the bullying.²²

The third researcher provided the school as a third example of a microsystem relevant to school bullying, and told me, “One of the most salient and influential environments for children is the school.”²³ Elaborating on the importance of the school, she spoke about the importance of school environment, teacher-student relationships, school climate, school belonging, and school connectedness.²⁴ While she placed most emphasis on the relationships between teachers and students, and the extent to which students feel they can receive support from teachers, she also pointed to the importance of “environmental-structural aspects of school life”, in terms of school and class size, timetabling, visibility, accessibility and playground resources.²⁵

Her comments about the environmental-structural aspects of school struck a chord with me, as something had been troubling me about the focus on *individuals or groups of individuals*. Not

²⁰ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 312.

²¹ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 312.

²² Hong and Espelage, 2012.

²³ Birkett, Espelage and Koenig, 2009, p. 989.

²⁴ Barboza et al., 2009; Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage and Swearer, 2010; Espelage et al., 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong and Garbarino, 2012; Nickerson et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2013; Swearer and Hymel, 2015; Swearer et al., 2010.

²⁵ Nickerson et al., 2014, p. 160; Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage, 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong and Garbarino, 2012; Hong et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2013; Swearer and Doll, 2001; Swearer et al., 2010.

only was it unclear to me why focus was not also placed on the bullying of or by teachers, but also why there was not more focus on how such interactions are connected to the institutional context itself in terms of compulsory attendance, class sizes, scholastic demands, teaching methods, curricular content, competition, school meals, grading, testing, and so on.²⁶

I looked at the doll. There was something about it that troubled me. I walked over and touched it. I began to wonder what it was made of. Surely school connectedness, for example, cannot be reduced to the interactions of *individuals or groups of individuals*. Surely the elements of the microsystem include not only interactions between individuals or groups of individuals, but also interactions between those individuals and the environmental-structural aspects of school? Surely these aspects also have an influence on the social processes taking place within the microsystem? What about the relations between school children and the insulation of the classroom, the temperature of the classroom, the quality of the school playground, the school timetable, text books, homework, uniforms, desks, or seats?

When I asked her whether there has been much focus on the environmental-structural aspects of school, she replied that “Relatively little is known about contextual/environmental factors that may predispose youths to bully others”²⁷, and that “Additional research is needed to examine school

²⁶ Ahmad and Salleh, 1997; Andrews and Chen, 2006; Connell, 2001; Duncan, 2013; Eriksson, Lindberg, Flygare and Daneback, 2002; Galloway and Roland, 2004; Horton, 2011, 2012; Kousholt and Fisker, 2014; Rivers, Duncan and Besag, 2007; Tam and Taki, 2007; Tanaka, 2001; Terefe and Mengistu, 1997; Walton, 2015; Willer and Hansen, 2004; Yoneyama, 1999, 2015; Yoneyama and Murphey, 2007; Yoneyama and Naito, 2003.

²⁷ Barboza et al., 2009, p. 104.

environmental factors as predicting bullying.”²⁸ I agreed, thanked her and the other two researchers for their time, and walked over to the third doll.

Doll 3: The mesosystem

There was only one researcher at the third doll, and he seemed happy to have someone to talk to. When I asked him to explain the doll he was standing next to, he began by telling me what he knew about the mesosystem doll in terms of its relation to the microsystems it is made up of:

Mesosystem level requires an understanding of the inter-relations among two or more microsystems, each containing the individual ... Experiences in one microsystem (i.e., youth-teacher) can influence the interactions in another (i.e., youth-peer).²⁹

Put another way, then, the mesosystem is “a system of microsystems.”³⁰ In his brief elaboration of the mesosystem, he provided a number of examples, including the interactions between the microsystems of family and school, family and peer group, and school and peer group.³¹ In discussing the inter-relations between the family and school, for example, he emphasised the importance of collaborations between parents and teachers and between parents and school counsellors.³² He also mentioned the issue of school-related stress and the sometimes unreasonable expectations of parents.³³

This last comment got me thinking, and I wondered if that would not also apply to the sometimes unreasonable

²⁸ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 317.

²⁹ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 317.

³⁰ Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515.

³¹ Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage, 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2013; Thornberg, 2015.

³² Hong et al., 2014.

³³ Barboza et al., 2009.

expectations of schools in terms of homework and testing? I also began to wonder about less direct inter-relations of importance for school bullying, such as the importance of language socialisation practices, grooming practices, eating habits, the affordability or otherwise of school uniforms, and the positive or negative perceptions of scholasticism within the family and amongst peers.

When I asked him whether he could elaborate about some of these inter-relations, he explained that he did not know about the impact of these inter-relations because “there is a dearth of research that explored mesosystem factors.”³⁴ We agreed that more needs to be said about mesosystem factors. I thanked him for his time and walked over to the fourth doll where another lone researcher was waiting.

Doll 4: The exosystem

The researcher at the fourth doll explained that the exosystem differs from the mesosystem somewhat in that it comprises the interactions between two or more microsystems, where the individual is only present in one of them. As she explained:

Exosystem considers aspects of the environment beyond the immediate system containing the individual ... This level is composed of interactions between two or more settings, but the individual is in only one of the settings.³⁵

The exosystem, then, is “an extension of the mesosystem”³⁶ that also includes those microsystems of which the individual is not a part. The exosystem thus affects the individual in an indirect way, through the decisions or actions taken in settings

³⁴ Hong and Garbarino, 2012, p. 273.

³⁵ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 317.

³⁶ Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 527.

where they are not present.³⁷ In elaborating about the role of the exosystem in school bullying, the researcher provided a number of examples, including school policies, staff training, budgetary decisions, neighbouring community environments, parental stress, the home situation of teachers and peers, and the mass media.³⁸

While she referred to school policies and staff training in relation to how levels of staff supervision, the organisation of physical settings, and anti-bullying policies directly impact the prevalence of school bullying, I began to wonder about other policies and forms of staff training that are perhaps less obviously implicated. Examples of these include the decisions taken on dress codes, food provision, discipline and punishment, timetabling, class sizes, streaming, curricular content, resource provision, teaching methods, evaluation and testing, teacher salaries, and staff workloads. These decisions are taken in settings where the individual child is not present, but directly impact on the school life of the child, in terms of what were earlier referred to as school microsystem factors, such as school environment, teacher-student relationships, school climate, school belonging, and school connectedness.

Remembering that the researcher at the mesosystem doll had told me that there has been little focus beyond the microsystem, I decided not to push the researcher further on the issue. Instead, I noted down my musings, thanked her for her time, and walked over to the final doll.

³⁷ Patton et al., 2013.

³⁸ Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage, 2014; Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong and Garbarino, 2012; Huang et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2013; Swearer and Doll, 2001; Swearer and Hymel, 2015; Thornberg, 2015.

Doll 5: The macrosystem

The researcher at the fifth doll was sitting on the concrete with his back against the doll enjoying the afternoon sun. When I approached, he stood up and offered his hand. We shook hands and introduced ourselves before I asked him if he had time to tell me about the doll he had been leaning against. He began by explaining:

The macrosystem level is regarded as a cultural ‘blueprint’ that may determine the social structures and activities that occur in the immediate system level.³⁹

Noticing that I was not really following what he meant, the researcher elaborated that the macrosystem level includes the social, cultural, organisational, and political contexts that influence the interactions that occur within the micro-, meso-, and exosystems.⁴⁰ The macrosystem thus refers to socio-cultural power structures, norms and beliefs relating to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, age, appearance, and so on.⁴¹

Elaborating on the issues of gender and sexuality, he explained that socio-cultural gender norms influence family, school and peer group norms related to what are deemed appropriate or inappropriate forms of masculinity or femininity, and that perceived non-conformity to such norms may result in homophobic bullying, for example.⁴² Furthermore, he explained that socio-cultural norms are transferred from one generation to the next via socialisation processes within microsystem institutions, such as the family, school and peer group, and

³⁹ Hong and Espelage, 2012, p. 317.

⁴⁰ Espelage, 2014; Huang et al., 2013.

⁴¹ Hong and Espelage, 2012; Thornberg, 2015.

⁴² Hong and Espelage, 2012; Hong and Garbarino, 2012; Patton et al., 2013.

through the mass media.⁴³ He also mentioned that socio-cultural norms regarding collectivism or individualism and the importance of academic achievement are macrosystem factors.⁴⁴

I was confused. I thought back to my earlier discussions with the researchers at the first doll. They had spoken about *individual* factors that predict bullying behaviour, including age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, obesity, disability, learning ability, intelligence, and socio-economic status. Now this researcher was telling me that these stem from norms and beliefs within the macrosystem. While individuals may differ in terms of the colour of their skin, hair or eyes, their height, their genitalia, their metabolism, their ability to walk or talk, their chronological age, and so on, understandings of such differences are rooted in the social, institutional, cultural and societal contexts of the macrosystem.

This certainly made more sense than imagining that boys, for example, are more often involved in bullying and tend to bully physically just because they are boys. I wondered to what extent differences in the bullying behaviour of boys and girls could be connected to perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality, and socio-cultural ideas about scholasticism, sporting prowess, and (hetero) sexual prowess, for example.⁴⁵ Thinking about the other supposedly individual predictors of bullying behaviour, I also wondered whether it would not also be fruitful to rethink them in terms of the wider social, cultural, organisational and political contexts from which they stem. Rather than focusing on the interactions between individuals or groups of individuals, it would then be possible to consider how

⁴³ Barboza et al., 2009; Hong and Garbarino, 2012.

⁴⁴ Huang et al., 2013.

⁴⁵ Connell, 2001; Drouet, 1993; Duncan, 1999; Duncan and Rivers, 2013; Epstein, 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Horton, 2007; Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell and Dowsett, 1985; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1997, 1999, 2000; Mills, 2001; Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman, 2003; Reay, 2002; Renold, 2001.

those interactions relate to the macrosystem and broader power relations.⁴⁶

When I asked the researcher to tell me more about this particular doll, he replied that there is not much to tell, as there has not been much focus on the macrosystem within school bullying research.⁴⁷ He explained that while the “social-ecological framework illustrates the intricacy of human behaviour, it is more difficult to empirically examine this complexity, particularly at the macrosystem level.”⁴⁸

Noticing that the other researchers were beginning to pack up their things, I thanked the researcher for his time and bid farewell. I walked back over to the bench and sat down. I placed my notebook on the bench beside me and watched as the researchers made their way back to the parking lot and climbed aboard the waiting bus. As the bus drove off, I looked across the square to where the dolls stood, bathed in the afternoon sunlight. The one that caught my attention was the macrosystem doll. My gaze was drawn to it. It was the largest of the five dolls and the only one visible when the bullying doll was fully assembled.

Reflections

Unsure of whether anyone else would turn up, or whether the man in the lab coat would return to pack up the dolls, I decided to take advantage of the now quiet square and spend some time reflecting over what had been a thought provoking day. Reaching down to pick up my notebook, I noticed that someone had scrawled a formula on the bench in red ink.

⁴⁶ Bansel, Davies, Laws and Linnell, 2009; Carrera et al., 2011; Davies, 2011; Horton, 2011, 2012; Kousholt and Fisker, 2014; Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Walton, 2005, 2011, 2015.

⁴⁷ Carrera, DePalma and Lameiras, 2011; Thornberg, 2015.

⁴⁸ Espelage and Swearer, 2010, p. 62.

$$B = f(PE)^{49}$$

I looked at it, wondered who had written it, and pondered what it could mean. I thought about the man who had wheeled the doll into the square and unpacked it. I thought about the five dolls and the explanations I had been provided about them.

The first doll, the individual, has received the greatest amount of attention from school bullying researchers and has been explained in terms of supposedly individual characteristics and predictors of bullying behaviour. The second doll, the microsystem, has received somewhat more attention than the larger three, but while examples of microsystems (family, school, and peer group) have been provided, the focus has been less on the settings than on the interactions between individuals or groups of individuals within those settings. There is still surprisingly little discussion of the environmental-structural aspects of microsystems. The third and fourth dolls, the meso- and exosystems, have still not received much attention at all, and seem almost to be an afterthought in discussions. In explaining those two dolls, researchers have focused on individuals or groups of individuals whose actions and interactions have direct implications for bullying interventions. There has been little consideration of those actions and interactions that are less directly implicated in bullying.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the last doll has received very little attention at all, despite the fact that this is the doll from which the other dolls stem and is also the only doll visible when the bullying doll is fully assembled. The explanations provided of this doll raise serious questions about school bullying researchers' continued focus on individuals or groups of individuals. After all, the macrosystem is "the highest level of

⁴⁹ Lewin, 1935, p. 73, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 16.

the ecological model” and its “institutions and associated ideologies ... permeate the society as a whole.”⁵⁰

In my notebook, I wrote out what I thought the formula $B = f(PE)$ could mean:

Bullying is a function of the interactions between people and their environments.⁵¹

In this explanation of the formula, environment refers not only to the *social* context, wherein individuals or groups of individuals interact, but also to the actual systems themselves and the institutions and cultures that constitute them. After all, “Environmental influences on development are of course not limited to human beings.”⁵²

I thought back to the special issue on school bullying in *Confero* and the essay that had suggested the social-ecological square as a possible meeting point.⁵³ While social-ecological approaches to school bullying have yet to fully consider the various systems within which bullying occurs, or indeed the environmental-structural aspects of those systems, the theoretical framework does seem to offer promise in terms of thinking about school bullying not only as the interactions between individuals or groups of individuals, but also in terms of those individuals and the environments within which their interactions are situated and which influence those interactions.

I looked out across the square. It was a large square with plenty of room for the researchers I had met earlier and for any who were yet to arrive. It could potentially provide the space needed for cross-paradigmatic discussions of school bullying. However,

⁵⁰ Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 527.

⁵¹ In Lewin, B stood for behaviour more generally. Lewin, 1935, p. 73, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 16.

⁵² Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 522.

⁵³ Thornberg, 2015.

such discussions would not only require other researchers to venture out to the square, but also for those who already frequent the square to step away from the inner-most individual doll, and the second smallest doll within which it is directly located, in order to consider equally the importance of the other layers of the bullying doll.

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