# Impact of a varied understanding of school bullying

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Impact of a varied understanding of school bullying

Abstract

Purpose: Traditional school bullying is complex and overlapping, hence research suggests there is a varied definition of the term (Canty, Stubbe, Steers & Collings, 2016). The current study investigated the potential effects of the term bullying on adolescent experiences of bullying. Additionally, the study examined bully, victim, bully-victim, and bystander identity as a moderating factor of experience of the term.

Design/methodology/approach: Research appears to seldom offer adolescents the opportunity to discuss bullying using qualitative methods within naturalistic environments. Therefore, the current study adopted a phenomenological framework for adolescents to share their experiences. Data comprised recordings of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with adolescents (n = 20) in high-school settings.

Findings: The current study supported the notion that adolescents perceive a varied use of the term bullying in schools. The sample experience a varied understanding of bullying in which they explain: 1) increases exposure to bullying, 2) impacts social perception of bullying, 3) reduces trust in anti-bullying intervention, 4) reduces coping self-efficacy amongst victims of bullying, and 5) impacts negatively on friendships.

Originality/value: Findings suggest a knowledge deficit in transferring information about school bullying from experts to non-experts. The sample indicated that a varied use of the term bullying has negative impact on their social and emotional functioning particularly; in managing distress and maintaining relationships. Additionally, inconsistent understanding of the term was said to increase the frequency of bullying, perception of bullying, and trust in intervention amongst the sample. Limitations of the research, recommendations for practice and intervention are briefly discussed.

Keywords: traditional school bullying, bully, victim, bully-victim, bystander, social and emotional impact.
Introduction: Olweus (1978) established systematic, psychological research on bullying, since then bullying can be identified as a significant, widespread public health problem (Hellstrom, Perrson & Hagquist, 2015). The effects of bullying can be associated with: suicide, suicide ideation and planning (Roh et al, 2015; Bell, 2014); mental health implications (Busch, Laninga-Wijnen, van Yperen, Schrijvers & De Leeuw, 2015; Lereya, Copeland, Zammit & Wolke, 2015); physical health implications and health risk behaviour (Stuart & Jose, 2014; Azagba, 2016); impact on social functioning (Feldman et al, 2014; Hutzell & Payne, 2012) and self-image (Cho & Choi, 2016); criminality (Decamp & Newby, 2015; Wong & Schonlau, 2013) and impaired cognition (Ponzo, 2013). Successful anti-bullying intervention suggests schools, communities, and parents should take a shared and active role in attending anti-bullying workshops, training, and meetings so that they: understand the definitive features of bullying, collectively enforce rules, and productively supervise behaviour (Olweus, 1993). Although state schools in the UK are required to adopt anti-bullying strategies, research suggests that avoidable pitfalls affect the quality of intervention e.g. some school staff require training to recognise and deal with bullying, and schools some schools adopt individual anti-bullying policies (Smith et al, 2012). Using multiple interventions in single communities can encourage varied perceptions about bullying, reporting, and auditing bullying behaviour (Thompson & Smith, 2012). Additionally, research also implies that multiple interventions can encourage miscommunication, passive and/or ‘zero-tolerance’ responses from adults that could be detrimental to intervention (Smith, Salmivalli & Cowie, 2012). Research suggests that there may be a lack of consistency in a shared understanding of bullying and Hellstrom et al, (2015) proposes that adolescent’s views about bullying are scarcely factored into the definition. Considering the extent of research on bullying, interventional strategy, and the nature of the impact of bullying, the term bullying can be defined in different ways (Smith, del Barrio & Tonkunaga, 2013). The current study intends to investigate potential effects of a varied understanding of bullying from a sample of adolescents.
Research has found a varied understanding of bullying between and within groups associated with traditional school bullying. However, researchers tend to agree the term bullying describes an imbalance of power, in which a perpetrator uses deliberate greater strength to repeatedly cause harm to a more vulnerable other using direct and indirect tactics (Olweus, 1991). Olweus’s (1991) definition of bullying is deemed the ‘gold standard’ and widely accepted by researchers (DeCamp & Newby, 2015). Adolescents’ definition of bullying can be dissimilar to researchers; research has highlighted that some adolescents do not to associate repetition and intentionality as factors associated with bullying (Gordillo, 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2008, Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt & Lemme, 2006; Guerin & Hennessey, 2002; Thornberg, Rosenqvist & Johansson, 2012; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011; Hellstrom et al, 2015). In addition, Maunder, Harrop & Tattersall (2010) indicate that some adolescents do not regard indirect aggression as a feature of bullying. Smith, Cowie, Olafsson & Liefooghe (2002) suggest some adolescents can find it difficult to recognise the subtlety of indirect aggression. Disparity in defining bullying has been observed amongst teachers and parents. Research has demonstrated that teachers can be varied in their definitions of bullying. Teachers’ understanding of bullying can be shaped by time spent in the profession and confidence in managing aggressive behaviour (Reid, Monsen & Rivers, 2004). School experts understanding of bullying can be encouraged by personal and emotional judgement and attitude towards bullying (Maunder et al, 2010; Monks et al, 2009). Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler & Wiener (2011) have found within their sample, that parents define bullying as either a myth, or a school ritual, a ‘rite of passage’. The current study intends to determine whether inconsistent understanding of the term bullying is perceived amongst an adolescent population, and if so, to capture the potential effects of a varied understanding of the term on adolescents’ experiences of bullying.

The current investigation attempts to determine whether identity has a moderating effect on adolescent experiences of bullying. Identity can play an role in the perception of moral or immoral behaviour (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Research has discovered a link between identity and perception of aggressive behaviour. Bullies / aggressive children can establish peer nominated prestige and ‘coolness’ amongst their peers (Hoff, Reese-Weber, Schneider & Stagg, 2009) and being labelled a ‘bully’ can give a degree of status amongst other populations (Ireland, 1999). Identity
may perhaps be a critical factor that influences the processing, understanding and perception of the word bullying. The current study intends to capture the experiences of bully, victim, bully-victim, and bystander identities in order to determine the potential effect of a varied understanding of bullying amongst identities involved in school aggression research. Bullies can be characterised by repeatedly engaging in aggressive behaviour. These aggressive behaviours can fall into two main categories: direct and indirect. Direct aggression can include physically aggressive acts and overt verbal attack, indirect aggression (including relational aggression) can factor behaviour that encourages cruel manipulation of relationships and damage to the victim’s social position; indirect aggression is usually carried out covertly (Lundh, Daukantaite & Wangby-Lundh 2014). Two distinct types of victim have been identified in school aggression research, pure victims and bully-victims (Wolke, Woods, Bloomsfield & Karstadt, 2000). Pure victims can be characterised as being socially isolated (Cho & Choi, 2016) and rejected by their peers (Ortega et al, 2012). Victims can show internalising problems including; depression, anxiety (Zwierzynska, Wolke & Lereya, 2013), increased risk of self-harm (Lereya et al, 2013) and suicide ideation (Winsper, Lereya, Zanarini & Wolke, 2012). Bully-victims can possess enhanced negative characteristics of both bullies and victims (Lereya, Samara & Wolke, 2015). Golmaryami et al (2016) have shown that some bully-victims can show callous unemotional traits, have limited emotional empathy to distress and can be insensitive to punishment. Bystanders are often characterised as individuals that are uninvolved in bullying as either a victim or a bully. Bystanders can have an active or passive role in bullying; either to actively stop or encourage the aggressive behaviour, or to passively view the behaviour (Polanin, Espelage & Pigott, 2012). Rigby (2012) highlights the importance of the role of the bystander as being influential in bullying intervention; in particular in reducing bullying when the bystander objects to the behaviour.
The current study: The goal of the current study was to investigate whether adolescents perceive a varied use of the term bullying in school settings. If a varied understanding of the term is identified, the study intends to capture the potential impact of a varied understanding of the term bullying on adolescent experiences of bullying. To explore the complexity of this concept, a phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1927) was adopted to explore adolescents’ experiences. The researcher contacted several school in the Northwest area of England with an invitation to take part in the study. Three schools accepted the invitation to take part. Each school was requested to select a sample of pupils based on their involvement in bullying, to participate in a series of homogeneous focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The sample consisted of total of 20 participants. Focus groups were followed by one-to-one interviews, each member of the focus group was subsequently interviewed by the researcher. Focus groups were used as an innovative source of data collection strategy to understand participant views. Focus groups are predominantly useful when working with disempowered populations (such as adolescents) that may be hesitant in voicing their views in one-to-one situations. Focus group interviews reflect a more natural environment for young people, as group interviews can be somewhat similar to a school environment where individuals are supported by their peers and participation is encouraged / moderated by a group leader. Essentially, group interviews gain a broad perspective from individuals that are affected by a shared concept (Kitzinger, 1995). Subsequently, follow-up interviews were used to validate findings from focus groups, in addition to providing a safe and confidential environment for adolescents to disclose information otherwise difficult to discuss in front of their peers. Additionally, collecting data using the two, similar methods allow validation of findings if similar data is yielded. The question schedule for interviews and focus groups consisted of closed and open questions; closed questions allowed a route of investigation and open questions allowed participants to engage with and discuss their experiences.
Insert: Table 1: Focus Group and Interview Question Schedule

Sample: The study was conducted in the North West area of England. Free schools, academies, faith schools, and private secondary schools in the North West area of England were approached to take part. All schools were situated in urban, inner city areas. A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure bullies, victims, bully-victims, and bystanders were included in the sample. In order to ensure all identities were included in the study, schools were requested to select pupils (using secure school records) who had 1) been bullied, 2) bullied, 3) both bullied and had been bullied, and 4) had been witness to bullying without being involved in the behaviour. Several schools declined the invitation due to time constraints; the final sample comprised two academies and a free school.

Data Analysis Methods: Thematic analysis (TA) was used to classify patterns of meaning within the data set. Joffe (2011) contends that phenomenological methods and TA are ‘well suited’. TA allows investigation of participants’ social reality from their subjective experience; a deep-rooted ideology in phenomenological method. Analysis was in reflection of the data corpus to allow a rich description of participant views. Themes were defined as patterned responses and prevalence to both the research purpose and entire data set. Repeated instances of information were considered important and categorised as subthemes. The process of analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) followed five phases. Firstly, the researcher developed familiarisation with the data by repeatedly listening to the audio-tape recordings and transcribing the data; reading and rereading the text. Secondly, the researcher coded the text by bringing to the surface interesting features of the transcript using a systematic process of categorising details that reflected the purpose of investigation and others that emerged naturally. The third and fourth phases consisted of the researcher searching for themes within each coded category and reflecting on the transcript to capture overlooked information. The fifth phase saw the naming of the emerged themes.
Results and Discussion

The data was mapped against Olweus (1991) gold standard definition of bullying in order to capture potential differences between researchers’ and adolescents’ understanding of bullying. Additionally, the understanding of bullying from bully, victim, bully-victim, and bystander identities were examined to mark any differences about the concept between identities.

Defining bullying: The sample was confident in their ability to conceptualise bullying and confirmed bullying as a word used to describe repeat, peer-to-peer direct aggression (Thornberg et al, 2012; Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011); “bullying is like a negative thing. Like hitting and kicking”, “it [bullying] doesn’t just happen once, it’s something that keeps on happening”. Participants expressed from the onset that the word bullying should only be used in cases of repeat instance or when aggressive actions are severe, a definition that sits well within Olweus’s (1993) framework. There were some minor inconsistencies in defining bullying amongst the sample. Some participants classified aggressive behaviour as bullying only when the victim showed clear signs of distress (victim attribution).

Indirect aggression: The sample did not include indirect aggression in their definition of bullying. When asked directly if behaviour such as; rumour spreading, alienation, and keeping secrets could be classified under the term, the response was always “No”. This finding is consistent with Maunier et al. (2010) in which they state adolescents within their sample did not regard indirect aggression as a feature of bullying. Power imbalance: The sample excluded power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator as a factor of bullying. There was no indication from focus group or interview data that adolescents perceive the bully stronger and the victim weaker. This finding is consistent with Gordillo’s (2012), Vaillancourt et al. (2008), Naylor et al. (2006) and Guerin & Hennessey’s (2002) research. Repetition of behaviour: The sample stated repetition was an important feature of bullying, without repetition most participants did not regard aggressive behaviour as bullying. When asked directly if singular instances of aggression could be classified as bullying most participants explained behaviour cannot be classified as bullying if it is not acted out in repetition.
Bullies: obtaining data from bullies about their understanding of bullying was difficult, interviews with bullies were shorter in time frame than all other interviews. When asked open questions bullies would respond with closed, polar responses “yes” or “no”. Bullies would often guide the conversation away from the topic. When one bully was asked how his understanding of bullying was developed, he proceeded to discuss his experiences of being on television in primary school. In addition, bullies would avoid conversation of the topic completely, when asked “what does bullying mean to you?” a regular response was “I don’t know…” or “I’m not sure…”. Research has identified bullying as an ‘amusing game’ to relieve some bullies of boredom or other unpleasant emotions such as; anger or rage (Thornberg & Knutsen, 2011). As a consequence some bullies can experience guilt and shame (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2001) therefore deny or avoid the threat of the concept, a potential reason for avoiding conversation of the topic. There are other potential explanations. Bullies may not be avoiding discussion at all, they may not be aware that their behaviour is ‘wrong’ they may believe that their behaviour is ‘acceptable’. Gordillo (2012) states that aggressors can have simplified thought patterns, an inability to break a concept into parts enables some aggressors to believe that their behaviour in ‘normal’ and can be acted out without repercussions. However, it is also possible that bullies are able to avoid detection using social and cognitive skills to manipulate the situation to their advantage (Sutton et al, 1999).

Victims & Bystanders: victims and bystanders were confident in defining bullying. Research explains similar effects of bullying on bystanders and victims (Janson & Hazler, 2004). Both bystanders and victims defined bullying similarly. Defining bullying as a direct aggressive act carried out in repetition and over time. Victims and bystanders discussed experiencing inconsistent use of the term bullying which led to deterioration of friendship groups and impact on intervention as a consequence. Bully-victims: bully-victims were inconsistent in their definition of the term. Often bully-victims would provide a definition from the onset that would alter throughout the process. Even though bully-victims responses were inconsistent, one topic was constant. Bully-victims coded aggressive behaviour as bullying by the victims’ ability to cope. If a victim was unable to cope with the aggressive behaviour the act should be categorised as bullying, if an individual could “laugh it off” the act should not be categorised as bullying.
Impact of a varied definition of bullying

Participants confirmed a varied understanding of bullying exists, and focused primarily on inconsistency amongst school staff, parents, and the media. Further, adolescents outlined negative implications of a varied use of the term bullying on five areas of their experiences of bullying:

Figure 1. Five main themes

Theme 1. Exposure to bullying: how much I am bullied.

According to adolescents’ within this study, the term bullying is misunderstood by school staff, consequently the term is overused and often applied to behaviour that is not considered bullying amongst the sample. The overuse of the term bullying leads pupils to believe they have been bullied more frequently than in reality. One victim explained that school staff regularly attract attention to her in hallways and classrooms “telling people off” in front of her and her peers; leading other pupils to “target and bully” her. The participant suggested that if the term was used in “real” instances of bullying and within a more confidential framework, bullying would be reduced for her instead of heightened. Other victims believed that if misuse of the term bullying by school staff continued, they would experience exacerbated amounts of bullying. Olweus (1993) suggests adults can bring more harassment from bullies if the intervention is not handled with knowledge and sensitivity, findings from the current study validate this point and give additional insight into the detrimental effects
of misinformed intervention on some adolescents within this study. Additionally, the sample believe the media lacks knowledge about the term bullying. The sample disclosed that the way in which the media portrays bullying is irresponsible as it reinforces and promotes bullying and encourages creative ways to display aggression. Adolescents explained that the media's portrayal of bullying, impacts on the frequency and the severity of bullying in their school environment.

Theme 2. Social perceptions of bullying: others perceptions of me.
Due to an inconsistent understanding about bullying, victims within the sample feel they are not taken seriously as victims and bully-victims believe they are labelled as bad people and are unable to alter the negative stereotype. Often victims were concerned that incorrect use of the term bullying influences public perception of bullying and victimisation. Victims felt their experiences of victimisation were perceived as insignificant, mild, with little consequence. Explaining that school staff apply the term to behaviour that is not bullying, behaviour that is not as “serious”.

One participant (victim) highlighted fear and frustration that people did not “take her seriously” as a victim, she suggested that people did not see what she was experiencing was not “just name calling”, her experiences were something much greater, with greater consequences. Additionally, the sample disclosed that the concept of bullying in the media encourages public perception of bullying and victimisation. Most participants expressed that the media, particularly sitcoms aimed at young people, make fun of bullying, in turn lessening public perception of victims’ experiences of bullying. Many bully-victims explained that bullying is seen by school staff as “negative” and “bad”, the perceptions of bullies is also “bad…bullies are bad people”. Bully-victims stated school staff regularly misunderstood playful behaviour as aggression, behaviour that is a “joke” was often misinterpreted as bullying. Bully-victims explained that because the perception of bullying is “bad”, bullies are labelled “bad people” and expectations of their behaviour are always negative.

Theme 3. Effective intervention: trust in intervention.
Participants, particularly victims, did not feel confident in the schools’ ability to recognise instances of bullying adequately enough to meet their needs. Further, explaining that they avoid discussing their experiences of school bullying with school staff, as they lack confidence in the ability to manage the behaviour. Adolescents’
explained the perception of bullying is diluted in their school environment due to the overuse of the term. Consequently, lessons on bullying are seen as unimportant, "pointless" and "boring". All participants consider lessons designed to build empathy and increase school awareness of bullying behaviour as "cop-out lessons".

According to the sample, frequent exposure to anti-bullying intervention within their school environment is creating a ‘zero-tolerance’ approach to managing bullying. In turn, the sample suggested that zero-tolerance approach is systematically reducing the perceived seriousness of the behaviour and the importance of developing empathy amongst the adolescent sample included within this study.

**Theme 4: Coping self-efficacy: how I feel I can cope.**

Victims within this study believe public perception of victimisation is diluted due to the media’s portrayal of the concept. In turn, victims feel “stress”, “frustration”, and “pressure” to cope. Often victims explained that “toughening-up” is difficult, because their experiences are too difficult to manage independently. Many victims of bullying voiced excellent parental support, their parents were “kind” and “caring” in response to their experiences. However, due to misunderstanding of bullying in the school environment, many victims expressed feeling isolated in dealing with bullying behaviour and the consequences of victimisation reduced their ability to cope. It could be implied from information presented by the sample, that school anti-bullying intervention may benefit from a larger input from the student voice in defining and managing bullying. However, as indicated Hellstrom et al (2015) proposes that adolescent views about bullying are scarcely factored into the definition.

**Theme 5: Impact on friendship: my social relationships.**

Bystanders believe that misuse of the term bullying in the school setting impacts on social relationships and the deterioration of friendships groups. Explaining further that friends could be “having fun” and “joking with each other”, they could be stopped and questioned about their behaviour. After prolonged and repeated instances of this, friction would arise within the friendship group and lead some pupils to feel as though their friends had bullied them. Bully-victims explained a consistent pattern of
losing friends due to a misunderstanding of bullying behaviour. One participant (bully-victim) explained that people expected her to bully and consistently “labelled” any behaviour as bullying. Bully-victims were much more vocal in expressing that what is often considered a “joke” can be wrongfully considered bullying and has serious consequences on social relationships leading to isolation. Previous research has suggested bully-victims can use victim attribution as a method of reducing moral concern and to disengage from inflicting suffering (Gini, Pozzoli & Hauser, 2011).

However, the current study has established that bully-victims might believe their behaviour is humorous, just, and acceptable. Using a single anti-bullying policy could prompt a consistent definition of bullying and provide greater clarity over the types of behaviour that should be covered by the term. Thus, may provide clearer guidelines about aggressive behaviour amongst those who engage in bullying.

Conclusions and limitations: The current study confirmed that the sample of adolescents within this particular study perceive an inconsistent understanding of bullying in the school setting. Further, the sample disclosed that a varied understanding of bullying had impact on their social and emotional wellbeing. A varied understanding of bullying impacted the sample negatively on several areas of their social and emotional functioning including; managing distress, maintaining relationships, and trust in authority and intervention. The sample disclosed that a varied understanding of bullying exists within their school environment and that their definition of bullying is dissimilar to school staff. The study raises the issue that a knowledge deficit may exist when transferring expert information about bullying to non-experts. The sample explained experiencing negative effects due to differences in the way in which bullying is understood in their school environments. Therefore, is it proposed that a single anti-bullying policy, led by expert researchers and informed by young people, may reduce discrepancy about bullying with the intention of reducing inconsistency and encouraging a shared understanding of bullying. It is proposed that a single approach to reducing bullying in schools may give clear guidelines to school staff and adolescents about the type of behaviour categorised under the term. There are however, several limitations of the study that would need to be addressed in order to fully support the propositions raised for intervention. Firstly, the study recruited an opportunity sample, data analysis did not reach saturation due to restrictions in recruitment; thus further insight into the concepts
discussed is required. Secondly, little input from those who engage in bullying resulted in under-representation of bully identity in the research. Due to examinations, older school pupils were under represented in the data when compared to younger school pupils; therefore, results are mostly reflective of students who are transitioning and adjusting to a high school environment. The limited sample size taken from a single region of England is not representative enough to ensure valid and reliable suggestions for intervention. Therefore, a greater and more representative sample is required when revisiting this area and in developing a framework for intervention.
References


