

## COMMENTARY

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### Bullying and Peer Victimization at School: Considerations and Future Directions

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This series of articles highlights many important issues that researchers, educators, and clinicians are grappling with in understanding and treating bullying and victimization. For instance, these articles present information on the comorbidities and trajectories of different subgroups of bullies and victims, highlight the important buffering role that positive adults and school personnel can play in preventing the harmful effects of victimization, and emphasize the importance of considering school contexts (e.g., playground, lunchroom, classroom, and hallways) and subtypes of bullying and victimization when considering the form and function of bullying problems. The three articles also provide a clear direction for future research in this burgeoning field. As such, they highlight the need for comprehensive and multifaceted assessments of bullying and victimization, and they speak to the importance of using partnership-based

approaches in designing school- and community-based programs to prevent bullying and victimization. In this commentary, I will highlight these points and several additional considerations that these excellent research studies address. In doing so, I hope to help readers better understand the ways in which research can be linked to practice so that research studies in this area can impact school and community prevention efforts to decrease the harmful effects of bullying and victimization among youth.

#### **Current Status of Bullying and Victimization Research**

Our knowledge of bullying and victimization was greatly enhanced by Dan Olweus's pioneering bully prevention efforts in the 1970s and 1980s. Since that time, research has investigated the frequency, characteristics, and comorbidities associated with both bullying

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and victimization behavior. For instance, research suggests that bullies are often aggressive, oppositional, and hostile towards their peers, while also demonstrating academic difficulties and presenting challenges for their teachers (see Leff, Power, & Goldstein, 2004). Research examining victimization profiles suggest that youth who are frequently victimized by their peers are often more sad, anxious, and withdrawn, and have lower self-esteem than their peers, and they experience increasing school maladjustment and avoidance over time (see Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). In fact, the research literature often implies that bullies and victims are quite distinct groups of children who uniformly experience a host of negative outcomes. However, the current set of studies in *School Psychology Review* is significant because these studies move the field forward through their appreciation of the complexity of peer bullying. For instance, the article by Holt, Finkelhor, and Kaufman Kantor (2007) helps readers to better understand the challenges of children who are both frequent bullies and victims (bully-victim subgroup) and the multiple ways in which youth can be victimized both at school and within the broader family and/or community context (Holt et al., 2007). The article by Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2007) furthers the field by examining the differences between student and staff perceptions and attitudes towards bullying and addresses the implications of these findings for designing and adapting bullying prevention efforts. Finally, Davidson and Demaray (2007) empirically address the way in which different forms of social support may buffer the harmful effects of bullying. Paying particular attention to the ways in which social support from parents, classmates, and school personnel can influence young children's reactions to bullying is an extremely important and needed area of further investigation.

Given that a sizable number of youth can be categorized as bully-victims (8% of the sample in the Holt et al., 2007 study), it is important that researchers and educators better appreciate the complex comorbidities and challenges that this group of youth experience.

For instance, bully-victims had the highest rates of bullying *and* the highest rates of victimization as compared to other bully/victim subtypes and non-bully-victims. Most notable in this study was that bully-victims experienced high rates of non-peer-oriented forms of victimization including child maltreatment, sexual victimization, conventional crime, and indirect victimization when compared to bullies, victims, and non-bully-victims. This speaks to the importance of not only recognizing the high-risk status of bully-victims, but also suggests that assessment protocols in school-based bullying interventions may benefit by incorporating a broader assessment of victimization beyond just peer-oriented forms of victimization.

Although bullies have a number of negative comorbidities including high rates of victimization (Holt et al., 2007), aggressors and bullies also are sometimes viewed in a positive and influential manner by their peers (see Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2004). There are some suggestions in the literature that this may be more often true of relational aggressors and bullies (i.e., bullies that use social manipulation to harm others by gossiping, threatening to withdraw friendships, or using social exclusion) than physical aggressors and bullies (Rose et al., 2004). Bradshaw and colleagues (2007) shed light on this important issue by comparing staff and student perspectives on peer bullies. For instance, staff perceived peer bullies as being popular but also feared, and students tended to dislike those who bullied others. However, students at the middle school and high school level also perceived bullies as being quite popular. This raises important issues in better understanding, assessing, and treating peer bullies and aggressors. For instance, if a youth is actually quite influential, powerful, and/or popular by virtue of his or her social or physical dominance, then intervention efforts are more challenging because strategies must address the clear social payoff for the continued bullying behavior.

One of the important assumptions that underlie much intervention research on bullying and victimization is that social support can help to ameliorate the harmful effects of peer

victimization. Further, research has demonstrated that having a social network can serve as a powerful buffer against a host of negative effects (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). However, the Davidson and Demaray (2007) article helps readers to understand that the impact of social support varies depending upon a youth's gender, age, and prior experiences. Thus, it is an important finding that girls, in particular, seem to benefit from parental social support in dampening the negative internalizing symptoms often associated with victimization, whereas boys seem to benefit from teacher, classmate, and school forms of social support. The implication is that social support mechanisms may work quite differently for boys and girls, and that our intervention models need to take this into account. Further, the finding that social support was not found to buffer victimization from externalizing distress is also a powerful reminder that there can be negative effects for grouping deviant youths together in treatment (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999). As such, intervention efforts must carefully consider strategies for countering these potential negative effects, such as by including positive role models in intervention efforts.

### **Directions for Bullying and Victimization Research**

The series of articles on bullying is also helpful in suggesting several important avenues of future research on peer bullying and victimization, which are discussed in the following sections.

#### **Consideration of Assessment Tools**

The articles that appear in this issue of *School Psychology Review* have implications for the assessment of peer bullying and victimization. For instance, there is a growing recognition in the field that researchers and educators need to assess bullying and victimization through multiple methodologies (e.g., student self-report, teacher report, peer report, observational methodologies; Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Historically, self-reports have been the most widely used method to deter-

mine the prevalence of bullying and victimization and to try and address the impact of bullying prevention efforts (see Leff, Power, et al., 2004). Although self-report methods are extremely valuable in assessing one's attitudes and experiences of being bullied or victimized, some have suggested that bullies may underestimate their involvement in bullying and victims may not wish to recall incidents of victimization that may be upsetting for them (see Leff, Power, et al., 2004). Teacher and peer report methods are also commonly used to assess the frequency of bullying and victimization, to identify at-risk youth for interventions, and to assess intervention effects over time (Leff, Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Power, 1999). Despite having strong psychometric properties across many investigations, peer report methods typically require parental permission and may be viewed as unacceptable by some schools and parents as students are typically asked to rate or nominate their classmates across different behavioral descriptors. Teacher rating methods, some of which are widely used and have demonstrated strong psychometric properties, may provide an alternative but may not be very sensitive to bullying and victimization problems (Leff et al., 1999). Consistent with this, Bradshaw and colleagues (2007) found that school staff, including teachers, grossly underestimate the problem of peer bullying as compared to student report. Finally, some have advocated for the use of playground and lunchroom supervisor measures, as these newer indices provide school level data across important school contexts that can help to guide intervention planning (Leff, Power, Costigan, & Manz, 2003). However, playground and lunchroom report measures do not provide in-depth information about particular at-risk children and therefore are only helpful at an aggregate level. Given the strengths and limitations of the most commonly used indices, it is important that researchers and practitioners carefully consider their goals when selecting measures, partner with school staff to help guide assessment and intervention planning, and seek to obtain input from multiple sources whenever possible (Leff, Power, et al., 2004).

## Using a Developmental Ecological Systems Framework

Over the past 10–15 years there has been an impetus to view bullying and victimization from a developmental ecological systems framework based upon Bronfenbrenner's research (1986). This paradigm suggests that children's behavior is influenced by both their individual characteristics, personality, or biological predisposition and their relationships with influential others within their family, school, neighborhood, and cultural context. Using this perspective is essential in bullying prevention and intervention planning (Espelage & Swearer, 2003) so that programs not only teach at-risk youth problem-solving, empathy, and perspective-taking skills, but also are maximally responsive to the needs of the particular school, community, and cultural contexts. One mechanism for achieving this is by using a participatory action research (PAR) framework to form partnerships between researchers, educators, students, school staff, and community members to enhance a school's capacity to promote health and prevent bullying and victimization (Leff et al., 2007; Leff, Costigan, & Power, 2004).

PAR approaches blend scientific methods and prior research with feedback from key school and community stakeholders to help ensure that resulting intervention efforts are empirically grounded, based upon scientific best practice and informed by the needs and history of the local community (Leff, Costigan, et al., 2004; Nastasi et al., 2000). The PAR model relies upon the research team establishing a strong and trusting partnership with diverse school and community stakeholders. This can be especially challenging in urban, underresourced schools, in which school staff and parents may have had negative prior experiences with researchers or research studies (Fantuzzo, Coolahan, & Weiss, 1997). Nevertheless, the partnership and the collaborative relationship are extremely important to establish as they provide the scaffolding on which the intervention can be adapted, thereby ensuring the ecological validity and potential sustainability of the bullying prevention pro-

gram (Nastasi et al., 2000). The use of a PAR approach allows one to take a whole school and community-oriented approach to prevent bullying as it encourages active collaboration between researchers and all stakeholder groups in selecting, adapting, implementing, and evaluating the program. Although the use of a PAR approach can be somewhat time-consuming, it has the potential to enhance school and community capacity over time. Further, it is a culturally sensitive and respectful approach to address some of the most pressing issues facing today's school system, including bullying prevention and health promotion.

There are two primary areas for which we recommend the use of a participatory research approach to address gaps in the existing bullying prevention field. First, although there are a number of programs for aggressors and/or bullies, there are relatively few designed specifically for the victims of peer aggression. Even though some universal programs are appropriate for all students, including victims, it is important that more effort be devoted to develop interventions for peer victims. It will be necessary to take a broader social-ecological approach in this effort to help victims learn to be more assertive, to express their feelings appropriately, and to seek help at the appropriate times while also working with school personnel and parents to develop clear and consistent rules and consequences for peer bullying. One promising, recent example that has been specifically designed for peer victims through a participatory research process is the peer victimization intervention (Varjas et al., 2006). In the peer victimization intervention, the goals include increasing victims' problem-solving and coping skills and sense of belonging while also improving school and community resources. The second area where we recommend the use of a PAR framework is in addressing the more subtle forms of aggression, such as relational aggression, that are most prevalent among girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). There are some promising initial relational aggression intervention efforts (Harrist & Bradley, 2003; Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003; Leff et

al., 2007; Van Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Be-land, 2002), but clearly research regarding this topic is in its early stages.

### Final Considerations

One important consideration in conducting research related to bullying and victimization is the issue of obtaining consent from parents. Parental consent in research studies can be active, such that signed parental permission is required prior to a child being permitted to participate, or it can be passive, wherein parents are asked to return a form only if they do *not* wish for their child to participate. Institutional review boards and many school districts now require active parental permission for most child-oriented research studies, in part because parents' rights may be violated by passive consent procedures (Esbensen et al., 1996). For instance, when using passive consent procedures, the researchers assume that the parent has no objection with their child's participation in the study if they do not hear back to the contrary. Although this process may work in some cases, there is also a possibility that a parent has not been informed (e.g., the child loses the consent form) or even that the parent does not wish for their child to participate (e.g., the form is never signed and/or returned to the researcher) without the researcher being aware of this. Although passive consent procedures typically lead to higher participation rates than active consent procedures, they may also increase parent mistrust and skepticism with the research process (Blom-Hoffman, Leff, Beakley, Franko, & Power, 2007).

The three studies on this special topic all used passive consent procedures. Although this is quite understandable in the Bradshaw and colleagues (2007) study given that their needs assessment survey was conducted as part of an extremely large school planning initiative with over 15,000 students and would therefore not have been feasible, the other two studies may have benefited by using active consent procedures. For instance, in the Holt and colleagues study (2007), passive consent procedures were used even though sensitive

questions were asked related to suicidal ideation and potential sexual abuse. Although the study had institutional review board approval and school adjustment counselors were present for all questionnaire administrations, and these trained individuals provided appropriate follow-up care for any high-risk responses, it is possible that school personnel obtained sensitive information without full parental knowledge. For future research, we advocate for the use of multicomponent, partnership-based strategies for informing parents of research studies; encouraging strong communication between researchers, students, parents, and teachers; and helping to ensure that all parties understand the research study procedures (Blom-Hoffman et al., 2007). Although time-consuming and potentially subject to lower parental permission rates, these strategies help to build trust among researchers, school staff, and parents, and promote a collaborative framework for conducting research related to school bullying and victimization.

A second important consideration stemming from these excellent studies is the crucial role that school psychologists can play in the assessment and prevention of school bullying. Although school psychologists have historically focused upon assessment and individual treatment in the schools, there is an incredible opportunity for school psychologists to function as prevention specialists to help schools determine the appropriate assessment tools and to guide intervention planning, implementation, and evaluation (Leff, Power, Manz, Costigan, & Nabors, 2001). As part of this role, school psychologists can help to foster important partnerships among researchers, students, school staff, and community members to help ensure that bullying prevention efforts are empirically based, developmentally and culturally appropriate, and responsive to the needs of the school and surrounding communities.

### Summary

The articles in this series are well constructed, thought provoking, and have mean-

ingful implications for research on the topic of school bullying. They raise important issues that can help guide intervention planning, while highlighting the complexity of this expanding field. For instance, if a bully is viewed as both powerful and potentially popular, then our intervention efforts need to address this challenging dynamic as there is a clear social advantage for the bullying behavior to continue (Rose et al., 2004). Further, the fact that Bradshaw and colleagues (2007) found that school staff may underestimate the frequency of peer victimization despite being very concerned by these behaviors highlights the importance of educating school personnel about the different forms and functions of school bullying. Given that students at times may not appreciate the efforts teachers make to prevent bullying and victimization, it is essential that school staff members inform the student body when and how they are attempting to address these issues. Finally, with further development of prevention and intervention programs in the coming years, Davidson and Demaray's (2007) finding on the importance of parental social support, especially for girls, should be used to guide strategy design. As such, it will be crucial to expand intervention efforts to foster strong parental buy in and support.

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