DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Bullying in Schools:
How School and Student Characteristics Predict Bullying Behaviors
in American Secondary Schools

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Bullying takes place in social contexts. Theories about bullying tend to be embedded within the socioecological framework of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979). The framework suggests that individuals are nested in larger systems that influence individuals' behaviors. Each microsystem is an individual settings in which students interact with others. The meso-system for a student is the collection of micro-systems and their interrelations. The exo-system constitutes settings in which adults make decisions affecting micro and meso systems, but the focal youth is not included. Finally, the macrosystem include the cultural and normative contexts—in other words, the values, norms, and beliefs that community members share. Each of these systems operates in ways that can enhance or diminish the likelihood of bullying behavior.

This dissertation will argue that bullying is fundamentally a response to bullies' feelings of insecurity. Factors that past research has found to be associated with bullying include socioeconomic status and propensities towards violent behavior. Contextual factors posited here to produce the feelings of insecurity that lead to bullying include peer group dynamics, school climates, and teaching.

In relationship to peer groups, the theoretical framework of this dissertation draws primarily from the theories of Robert E. Crosnoe and Dorte M. Sondergaard. I assume that students are socially embedded in peer groups, in which they struggle for social status (Crosnoe 2011) and in many cases experience the threat of social marginalization (Sondergaard 2012). Peer groups have core members, others who are more marginal members, and still others who are outside the group but would like to be inside. Sondergaard suggests, based on a five-year qualitative study, that bullying behaviors (and victimization) will be most common among students at the margin of peer groups. For these students, insider status is at stake. These students at the fringes of peer groups (or outside them) are attacked by peers who worry that they themselves might suffer loss of social status or social marginalization. Being perceived as socially marginal places one at risk of becoming the target of bullying. Becoming the bully, instead of the victim, is an attempt by bullies to deflect attention and secure their own social status within the group. Hence, there are many who may feel a need to protect their status. Sondergaard, in particular, theorizes that the more insecure students feel about their social status in peer groups, the more they will resort to bullying behavior. I agree, but extend this idea to a larger fraction of the student body. While Sondergaard writes as though peer groups have singular, discrete boundaries, my own reasoning suggests that many members of a peer group may feel as though the boundary is just below their own position. In addition, there are other factors that may affect the feelings of insecurity that inspire bullying. These include student body composition and teaching styles, race, ethnicity and other forms of socio-economic diversity.

The Tripod survey data for this dissertation were collected from small schools that completed the long-version of the survey, which included the key bullying variables. Individual level data include classroom, school, and district level identifiers. The nested sampling structure requires multi-level modeling (MLM) for the calculation of unbiased estimates (Rabe-Hesketh & Skondral 2012, p. 3). Multi-level modeling makes it possible to account for statistical variation at different levels simultaneously, provided the data structure is nested. Parameter and residual variances are calculated for each level separately through the insertion of additional random effects in the regression function, one for each level.

All multivariate analyses in this dissertation are limited to white, black, and Latino boys. This is in response to significant gender differences in bullying behavior reported in previous studies and in order to restrain the complexity of the analyses. The resulting sample comprises N=6,491 student observations nested within 153 schools.

I find that individual-level student background characteristics are stronger predictors of bully identification than is the school context, as measure by student body composition and teaching style factors. In addition, social status insecurity is a mediating factor for many of the student- and school-level predictors of bullying. Boys of lower socioeconomic background, with less stable family structures, less educated parents, lower self-esteem, and less academic success bully more. In addition, I find evidence that deviating from the norm in terms of background characteristics predicts stronger bully identification and that this relationship is mediated by social status insecurity.

The dissertation distinguishes four types of schools, each of which is above or below average on two major dimensions. One dimension is academic support (i.e., how caring and responsive teachers are), while the other is academic press (i.e., how strict and demanding they are).

I find for black boys that students are more likely self-identify as bullies in schools that are below average on both support and press, compared those that are above average on both. In similar comparisons to schools that are below average on both support and press, I do not find statistically significant differences in self-reported bullying for schools that are below average on either support or press, but not both. Hence, for black boys, I conclude that both support and press at the school level help determine the amount of bullying.

The pattern for Latino boys is different. For them, self-reported bullying is higher when the school rates high on support, but low on press. This—i.e., being high in support but low on press—predicts significantly stronger bully-identification among Latino boys compared to being low on both support and press! I speculate that support may actually empower Latino boys in ways that increase their assertiveness. However, without press to discipline it, the increased sense of empowerment may lead to anti-social behaviors, including bullying.

I find no statistically significant role for teaching styles in predicting the amount of bully identification among white males.

Bullying intervention programs need to recognize the importance of students' feelings of social status insecurity for their bullying behavior. Teaching young boys (and girls) about respectful behavior and the negative consequences of victimization might not be a sufficient approach to stop them from bullying their peers. Strategies must be found to reduce students' worries about loss of social status and exclusion from peer groups.

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