

# Social Learning Theory: Bullying in Schools

Adam Huston

Bullying is now recognized as one of the most common forms of school violence in many countries around the world (Crothers, Kolbert, 2008). A national study in the U.S. found that in grades 6 to 10, around 30% of students reported some involvement in bullying (Bauman, 2008). In Japan, suicide rates by students, often connected to bullying, peaked in 2003 and have fallen recently because of awareness, however suicides still continue steadily each year (Lim, 2017). Student suicide rates in Japan often increase during the school year, and since 2014, suicide is the main cause of death for teenagers (Lu, 2015). Some school officials theorize that bullying in Japanese schools contribute to Japan's high suicide rates in children (Lu, 2015). Lately, around the world, bullying has expanded from verbal and physical attacks to other types of abuse; such as, internet badgering and provoking student suicides. Students who are targets of bullying suffer from anxiety, depression and other psychological problems (Crothers, Kolbert, 2008). It is no longer a behavior that teachers can ignore with comments like "They will grow out of it" or "It's just a passing stage". Moreover, bullying affects not only the victim but other students observing the behavior who also might be terrified of retaliation. Furthermore, child disciplinarian problems can be challenging for the classroom teacher possibly causing burnout (Crothers, Kolbert, 2008). The definition of bullying, defined by Olweus (1993), is a subset of aggression with three parts: 1) intent to do harm; 2) repetition; and 3) a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Bullying is a phenomenon that begins at home, grows and develops in the social construct of school, and can even evolve into the workplace. There are two types: overt bullying, which includes physical and verbal abuse; and indirect bullying, involving relational aggression that damages the target's relationships, for example, social exclusion or rumor mongering. The victims of relational bullying can suffer serious psychological problems in adulthood. This type of abuse can cause the greatest amount of distress because the signs are often unnoticed by the teacher (Bauman, 2008).

Since the 1970's, there has been a strong movement led by social learning theorists that promotes the acquisition of pro-social behavior; for example, acts of sharing, helping, cooperation and altruism that can be positively influenced by exposure to models (Crain, 2004). Socializing models should not only teach children virtues and socially acceptable behaviors, but also teach by example. Within the theoretical framework of social learning theory, this paper will examine some of the effects and roles of parents, teachers and other socializing agents in order to understand the complex social problem of bullying in schools. The first part of this paper will discuss social learning theory on a point by point basis in its relation to the phenomena of bullying. Secondly, this paper will examine some research concerning the learning of aggressive behaviors by appropriate models, and the impact of school-

based bullying intervention programs. The latter will stress the importance of modeling, reinforcing and enforcing pro-social behaviors to all students. The third part of this paper will discuss some of the criticisms of Social Learning Theory (SLT), and provide interpretations as to whether or not subsequent research is consistent with and supportive of SLT. Finally, this paper will offer areas of further research in the study of aggression and bullying, summarizing some of the recommended educational practices to reduce bullying in schools.

Albert Bandura is considered the father of SLT. His theory argues that the main factor that influences learning is modeling (Bandura, Walters, 1963). People learn different sets of complex behaviors by observing others and then adopting the observed behavior as their own. Observing others will: 1) increase the chance of performing observed behavior; and 2) increase the speed of learning (Hill, 2001). Although Bandura did not specifically put forth the case of bullying, he might argue that the model observed is not necessarily another bully at school but could be any behavior imitated from all types of media sources, family members, and social agents; for example, a favorite boxer on T.V or a parent who uses aggressive methods of problem-solving. We can all observe aggressive models and behaviors, but we may or may not perform the responses. When students observe aggressive behaviors related to bullying, how do some become the bully, the victim of bullying or the student with positive behavior?

Acquiring and performing a set of behavior is not automatic but depends on four main processes (Bandura, 1977). A child first acquires, from the model, some new responses to perform the behavior; for example, a physical way of causing pain to another. The second process is the *inhibition* or *disinhibition* of an already learned response. After a child acquires the behavior he or she will learn whether or not to perform the behavior in a given situation. Not making the response is called *inhibition*. *Disinhibition* occurs when the child does not initially imitate the observed behavior, but may follow another person exhibiting the previously inhibited behavior in some social context, for example the classroom. Bandura's (1977) third concept is *elicitation*: when one person performs a behavior, bystanders might become interested and join in the behavior even though they had no intention to do so. This concept might offer insight as to why some students gang up on a targeted student. For example, in the boys change room, one bully starts to verbally tease another student, eliciting other boys to join in. Over time this type of bullying could escalate into more serious threatening behaviors. The difference between disinhibition and elicitation is subtle. "In elicitation the sight of the model creates a positive desire to perform the activity, whereas in disinhibition the desire is already active and all that is needed is some indication that the desire can safely be indulged (Hill, 2001, pg. 141).

Bandura's final process, *vicarious reinforcement*, explains how the consequences to the model influence the performance of the behavior (Crain, 2004). When the model is punished effectively, the aggressive behavior is inhibited. However, if there is little or no direct consequence for the behavior it is imitated through disinhibition or elicitation. For example, if students observe the bully is punished for aggressive behavior related to bullying, they will probably hesitate to imitate that behavior. Conversely, if the potential bully sees a prized boxer praised in the media, or sees an older bully admired, (i.e. fear

mistaken as respect), the child is more likely to imitate him.

Bandura (1977) describes four other factors that can influence imitation: 1) *attention*: we notice events selectively, both in direct and indirect ways; 2) *retention*: what we learn has no practical use unless we remember it long enough to act on it; 3) *performance*: in order to model the observed behavior, the person must have the skills and characteristics to perform the behavior. We do not automatically learn everything we observe; and finally, 4) *motivation*; we will imitate another if we expect to gain a reward (Crain, 2004). The observer will look at his or her past history of direct or indirect reinforcements. Considering the example of bullying, the potential bully might have been praised by his or her parents for aggressive behavior, or the bully might have already received some concrete reward, for example, the best seat in the classroom. The bully might misinterpret fear as respect and admiration from the victim and other bystanders. These sources of information give some indication as to whether the bully expects to be rewarded which may consequently reinforce the aggressive behavior.

How can we show the bully, not to be a bully? The second part of this essay will examine the validity of Bandura's theory, exploring some of his and others' research on aggression, continuing with more recent studies examining of the relationship between positive role-modeling and bullying in schools. Bandura and his colleagues designed many experiments on the learning of aggression (Crain, 2004). Aggression is typically prohibited in most social situations; however most cultures suggest when aggression is acceptable (Crain, 2004). Parents and other social agents reward children when they express aggression in socially appropriate ways (fighting in sports, boys play, hunting) and punish children when they act in socially unacceptable ways. Bandura and his colleagues discovered through many experiments and research that “[c]hildren observe aggressive behavior, notice when they are reinforced, and imitate accordingly (Crain, 2004, pg. 202). They also found “evidence that the likelihood of imitation depends on reward to the model, reward to the child, the apparent power and status of the model, and other motivational variables (Hill, 2001, pg. 143). In order to reduce the aggressive behaviors of bullying, Bandura's might argue that we must exemplify models that achieve success with non-aggressive problem solving and discourage those that achieve their goals in aggressive ways. In other words, the best way to attack the phenomenon of bullying is to promote socially acceptable pro-social behaviors in the media, schools, and at home.

Today, many educators still believe in the importance of intervention programs using modeling techniques to reduce school bullying. A recent year-long intervention program, called Steps to Respect, successfully reduced bullying behaviors (Hirschstein, Edstrom, Frey, Snell, MacKenzie, 2007). The program was school-wide, reporting data from 859 students in two suburban districts. The main focus of the program was effective anti-bullying measurements and procedures; training for staff supporting socially acceptable behavior; and coaching students involved in bullying. Some examples include “talking the talk, where pro-social behaviors and social skills are a part of the curriculum and “walking the talk, where victimized students are coached to make eye contact and use a strong voice in interactions (Hirschstein, Edstrom, Frey, Snell, MacKenzie, 2007). Reviewed school-based research, cited in Bauman (2008), found 26 intervention studies with mixed results. Some of the difficulties

were choosing incorrect intervention programs, few positive results in high schools, and support staff who were not fully committed. Like Bandura, Bauman (2008) argued that cultural practices contradict the belief of a safe school environment. She quoted one of her own surveys, where a respondent said, “Children reflect the values and behavior they see in their homes, on television, in video games, and in the behaviors of famous personalities and world leaders (Bauman, 2008, pg. 386). When children see role-models use bullying and intimidation tactics, they believe these approaches are acceptable problem-solving techniques (Bauman, 2008). Bauman (2008) concludes that school counselors are in a unique position to be leaders in reducing school bullying. She recommended that counselors should provide training for staff, students and parents; schools should implement adult monitors to supervise student’s unstructured time; and introduce strong, effective, anti-bullying measures to inhibit aggressive behavior.

Georgiou (2008) conducted a study examining the influence of maternal modeling characteristics to understand peer aggression, specifically, bullying and victimization. Previous research cited in Georgiou (2008), described that some parents and siblings ignore exhibited positive behavior and actually reinforce negative behavior through attention, laughter or even approval. “Children learn to be aggressive towards others, especially those who are less powerful than them, by watching the daily interactions of their family members (Georgiou, 2008, pg. 109). The participants in the study were 252 elementary students and their mothers. Georgiou (2008), in line with previous research, found that parenting techniques, particularly harsh and inconsistent punishment by depressed mothers, often led to child aggression, especially in boys. Georgiou (2008) concluded that school psychologists and social workers could improve the effectiveness of bullying intervention programs, but argued that parents must be included in the whole effort. “Parents need to be educated and informed about bullying and victimization problems because “the phenomenon has its roots at home (Georgiou, 2008, pg. 123). Positive modeling by parents and educators is vital to reducing bullying in schools.

All the researchers above advance the concept that bullying is deterred by stressing the importance of good role models, backing the ideas theorized by Bandura. However, SLT does have some limitations. The third part of this paper will quickly discuss whether or not recent research supports Bandura’s ideas, and then discuss some theoretical criticisms of SLT. Using the seven steps of theory analysis, this paper has analyzed the history, meaning, and use of Bandura’s theory. Bandura’s theory of learning can be comparatively tested in school institutions and can be applied generally to other cultures. However, some of the criticisms of his theory involve logical adequacy and parsimony. Science tends to prefer the simplest explanation: choose a hypothesis that introduces the fewest assumptions and postulates the fewest entities – while still sufficiently answering the question. Bandura’s declaration that we learn everything from models in the environment is *simple*. Bandura “has little use for interpretations of aggression as either an innate human drive or an automatic reaction to frustration (Hill, 2001, pg. 143). The simplest explanations often yield to complex questions as new data emerges.

*What if the bully was bad to begin with?* Despite most researchers agreeing that bullying behavior is primarily related to social variables, there are a few studies that link bullying with personality and neuro-psychological disorders (Georgiou, 2008). Furthermore, there is research with evidence of

innate causes playing a role in bullying behaviors; for example, genetic defects, brain abnormalities and hormonal imbalances (Harvey, Treadway, Heames, Duke, 2009). The premise is that certain innate or biological predispositions can be activated by certain environmental contexts.

*Are there certain genetic tendencies or dispositions that may cause someone to enjoy aggressive behaviors?* After examining Bandura's own research, Kohlberg, cited in Crain (2001), stated that individuals sometimes imitated aggressive behavior, without any apparent reinforcement, because they found such behavior intrinsically interesting. Some aggressive behavior might be performed by bullies simply because of novelty, or may involve some intrinsic need for control and power.

*What about emotional bursts of bullying?* Another difficulty in explaining the phenomenon of bullying based solely on environmental influences is reactive or emotional aggression. Reactive aggression is "characterized as 'hot blooded', automatic, defensive responses to immediate and often misperceived threat (McAdams, Schmidt, 2007, pg. 122). Teachers may classify these students as having a 'short fuse' because they tend to be quickly frustrated, easily threatened, impulsive and over-reactive (McAdams, Schmidt, 2007). These types of explosive reactions can, hopefully, be controlled by intervention methods, but point towards more innate causality.

*Who taught what to whom?* Finally, critics of Bandura's experiments also argue that the logical direction of influence in learning remains questionable. Who is the victim? Is it the child of a parent who uses aggressive techniques, or the parent of an aggressive child? A difficult and temperamental child may elicit more punitive responses from parents and teachers (Georgiou, 2008). Correlation does not imply causation. Even though models may, in fact, display aggression related to bullying behaviors, and the results correlate the existing influence between the model and child, it is difficult to prove a direct cause and effect relationship. The final part of this paper discusses areas of further research in bullying, summarizing some of the educational practices recommended by research to ameliorate bullying in schools.

There is some research into the methodology of coaching bullies with pro-social behaviors, but more research is needed to understand any possible innate tendencies and other motivational justifications for aggressive behavior. Crothers and Kolbert (2008) cited evidence that the perpetrators of bullying are impulsive, lack empathy, misattribute their peers' action as hostile, and perceive aggression as an acceptable way of problem-solving. They also describe ways for teachers to converse with bullies effectively; "[T]he objective is to enable the perpetrator to non-defensively evaluate whether his or her behavior is meeting his or her goals (Crothers, Kolbert, 2008, pg. 136). The teacher can discuss the value of concern for others, considering the feelings of the victim, thereby re-examining any false misconceptions. McAdams and Schmidt (2007) offer some other recommendations for counseling aggressive bullies in schools; for example, reinforcing positive achievements, focusing on the feelings of the bully, and convincing the bully that the perceived benefit of aggression is outweighed by both the negative consequences of hurting others and the benefits of pro-social behavior.

The advancement of technology and the internet have, unfortunately, created a unique form of bullying requiring much more study – cyber-bullying; which is the use of communicative technology,

such as emails and text messages, to produce deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior intended to harm others (Bauman, 2008). Because of reduced accountability and less face to face interaction, this form of bullying sheds more light on the possible innate characteristics of bullying. When there is no victim to visibly see, the darker impulses of humans are more left unchecked. There are often no bystanders, little or no deterrents, and very few social factors inhibiting this behavior. Any student can simply transmit a hateful or racist message behind the mask of cyber-anonymity. Furthermore, there is now endless hate, threats, and bullying online for all to see and model their behavior from, and some ‘internet trolls’ do it simply for the fun of it. Alarming, cyber-bullying is now an emerging international public health concern, with a significant detrimental impact on a teenager’s life (Nixon, 2014). Evidence suggests that most adolescents involved in cyberbullying often do not ask for help from adults and therefore it is even more important to be proactive when giving support (Nixon, 2014).

The final area worth noting for future study is bullying behavior in the work place and its detrimental effects on productivity and employee morale (Harvey, Treadway, Heames, Duke, 2009). In the global economy, companies are becoming increasingly diverse, mixing foreign and native workers. Sometimes bullying behaviors in the workplace focus on the stigmatization of foreign workers. Employing foreign workers in countries with different legal environments and working standards can create the use of sweatshops (Harvey, Treadway, Heames, Duke, 2009). It is easy to visualize how the business ‘bully’ evolved from the school playground, and is now commanding companies focused on profits – with little regard for the safety and security of its victimized workers.

To help decrease the amount of bullying behaviors, all parents and educators must teach children pro-social and anti-bullying behavior at an early age; in the home and reinforced in the classroom. Crothers and Kolbert (2008), state that the basic strategy in addressing bullying is to establish strictly enforced rules prohibiting it. Teachers and school counselors must tackle bullying as a daily behavior management issue in the school environment (Crothers, Kolbert, 2008). “Another means of addressing bullying is teacher vigilance regarding student behavior in the classroom and throughout the school in general (Crothers, Kolbert, 2008, pg. 134). Teachers should model effective strategies for coping with bullying or potentially threatening situations, for example, learning to control anger and cooling off; group problem solving; and seeking a mediator for intervention. Openly discuss the problem in general and in every class, giving students time to discuss possible experiences they may have had. Students must understand the importance of diversity in the classroom, where all individuals, regardless of their race, class, ethnicity, or gender are treated fairly and equally in a co-operative community.

In conclusion, most of the research today has continued to stress the importance of implementing measures based on Bandura’s theoretical principles. His valuable and influential work increased our awareness in the importance of models in child-rearing and education. Bullying begins at home. Most parents understand the importance of models and teaching by example in child rearing and education, but some parents overlook just how influential modeling can be. Parents that use aggressive problem-solving techniques may be unintentionally providing a good demonstration of how to hurt others. The parents of bullies could ask – are we inadvertently modeling the behavior ourselves? We must ‘walk

the talk, if the adult tells the child to wait at the crosswalk, the adult must also wait at the crosswalk. As citizens in a highly observable, world we must display generosity and helpfulness throughout our own behavior.

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