Introduction

The core theme of this book is theory building in relation to the problem of school bullying. The aim is to support problem solving in practice. It explores the way in which individuals build their personal theories of bullying and the way in which the public body of knowledge has been built to date. A flexible model of bullying is offered that may be used to organise and integrate a broad range of theory. Although the focus is often on psychologists and psychological theory, it is fully recognised that the subject of bullying is studied by other disciplines and that the majority of practitioners managing this problem in schools are teachers. Indeed, the search for relevant theory should know no disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, the knowledge developed by practitioners in their day-to-day work in schools represents an important starting place for the future development of theory. This is clearly demonstrated in Chapter 1. Overall, this book argues for a redefinition of the relationship between practitioners and academics so that personal theories of bullying and the public body of knowledge feed into one another more routinely and more productively.

This approach towards the theory of school bullying is largely the product of four studies. The first was a systemic case study of bullying in a mainstream secondary school. The second was a retrospective study with adults who were Deaf or hearing impaired. The third explored how applied psychologists used theory in practice. The fourth explored how psychologists who have published on the subject of school bullying (a) engaged with and employed theory and (b) believed the public body of knowledge should be developed further in the future.

The enduring difficulty of defining bullying

The question of what constitutes bullying remains problematic. There tends to be broad agreement with Olweus' (1993) position that it involves negative behaviours, repeated over time towards someone who has difficulty defending themselves. An imbalance of power and deliberate intent

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are commonly assumed. However, each of these points can be debated. Which negative behaviours are included? How often and for how long do the behaviours need to be repeated before they constitute bullying? What is an imbalance of power? How is 'deliberate' intention defined or measured? These are not just semantic concerns. The way in which each of these criteria is operationalised has a huge impact on whether a child is categorised as a victim, bully – or neither. The trend seems to be towards increasingly inclusive operational definitions.[1] If definitions of bullying – or the way in which they are applied in practice – become increasingly inclusive, this makes it difficult to compare the results of different studies, to follow trends over time and to develop a coherent narrative about causal factors. In practice, it means that more children are being categorised as victims and bullies. This in itself may sometimes cause problems. It may be pathologising and carry risks of creating dependency. It also increases the danger that those children with the most serious problems may be overlooked within the ever-expanding body of children categorised as victims. If the category of children categorised as victims becomes too inclusive, teachers may feel overwhelmed and demoralised, and may ultimately disengage from the problem.

The tendency in this book is to talk in terms of 'bullying behaviour' and 'undesirable patterns of interaction' rather than 'bullying' per se. In large part, this is because several of the processes discussed as potential causes of bullying operate at an unconscious level. Therefore, although they cause upset and even harm, there may be *no deliberate*, conscious intention on the part of the apparent aggressors. Furthermore, in the complex social interactions that take place in schools, it is difficult to apply the concept of an imbalance of power precisely or consistently if no overt physical aggression is involved. The basic assumption in this book is that a wide range of processes may generate repeatedly aggressive behaviour that is targeted against one or more children who are unable to avoid or stop these attacks or to protect themselves against the effects of this behaviour. A further assumption is that bullying

[1] For example, Schuster (2007) observes: 'Olweus' definition requires the negative acts to be carried out (1) systematically. Operationally, this is often defined as repeatedly (e.g., at least once a week) and long-lasting (e.g., at least over a period of six months) … (but) studies finding rates of up to 90% … asked participants whether they had once in their school life experienced such an incident! Whereas duration and repetition can be taken into account fairly easily, the potentially more genuine criteria of (2) imbalance of power and (3) intention of harm have been neglected even more often' (p. 411). She also makes a distinction between genuine peer victimisation in which a group gangs up on an individual and 'discipline problems' in which there is a climate of generalised aggression in a class.

behaviour is sometimes a deeply unfortunate by-product of individuals or groups pursuing various goals in their internal and external worlds. Consequently, everyone will be involved from time to time as 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. Nonetheless, there will be a minority of people who are particularly prone to becoming involved as victims, bullies or both. There will also be some relationships in which the form the behaviour takes is particularly harmful, intense or prolonged. In these cases, there is a much greater risk of harm to the individual in both the short and long term. Indeed, it can be argued that the decision as to whether or not to intervene in peer relationship difficulties, how to intervene and who should intervene should be based on an assessment of the actual risks to the children involved (see, for example, Malcomess, 2005).

Overall, this book makes the case that defining bullying is an integral part of addressing the problem. The first part suggests one particular way of defining bullying. The second part explores how applied psychologists and experts in the field use theory to understand and address problems in practice. The final part examines how the field as a whole has developed its current understanding of bullying and how definitions might be developed further in the future.

An integrated, systemic model of school bullying

Chapters 1 to 4 relate to the development of an integrated, systemic model within which bullying behaviour may be conceptualised. Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of the research to date, concluding that important advances have been made in our understanding of bullying. Indeed, a considerable amount of useful knowledge has been gained and this now feeds into a range of intervention programmes. The results of such programmes have been increasingly encouraging. At present, the success of intervention programmes seems to relate to the level of effort and commitment made by a school, the extent to which interventions are ongoing and the level of support given to the programmes. What is less clear is precisely what effect each intervention has and why. So, further research is needed to improve the effectiveness of interventions and our understanding of interventions.

Making sense of school systems

Chapter 2 gives a detailed description of one school system, identifying the pattern of interactions that produced, maintained or reduced bullying in that school. In short, the pressure to be the same, and to gain and maintain one's position within the peer group, shaped most

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children's interactions on a day-to-day basis. Bullying was different to
these ongoing power struggles. The danger was for a child to become
stuck in the one-down position within a one-up/one-down pattern of
relating. This might then evolve into a more enduring 'bully–victim
relationship' if norms of behaviour and roles became established, and
the status quo was protected by the emergence of an impermeable
relationship boundary. Reasons why some children may be prone to
getting stuck in the one-down position are discussed. For example,
students who were hearing impaired were subject to these same pres-
sures but in addition were in danger of being stigmatised which might
be construed as a form of social aggression that also puts children at
increased risk of actual bullying. The second half of the chapter goes
on to describe the response of the specialist staff to these problems.
Factors within the system that shaped and sustained their approach are
discussed. The approach developed by the specialist staff suggested a
detailed understanding of the problems faced by the hearing impaired
students. However, there were significant constraints upon them as
they tried to intervene. As a consequence, they focused their attention
on that part of the system where they felt they had most leverage for
change. It is of note that the specialist staff retained responsibility for
all aspects of the children's difficulties – including the more intractable
problems they were unable to resolve. Unfortunately, by confidently
asserting that they knew what the problem was and what should be
done, the specialist staff may have inadvertently masked the fact that
some of the students' needs were not being met. While the rest of the
school thought the students' problems were being adequately managed,
no change was suggested in the approach taken. Reasons are explored
as to why the specialist staff did not share the difficulties they were
having. One reason seemed to be that the specialist staff may have had
unrealistically high expectations of themselves. Another was that they
seemed to be performing the implicit role of managing anxiety within
the system about this particular form of difference. Furthermore, whilst
the other adults in the system believed that the hearing impaired stu-
dents' needs were being adequately addressed, the specialist staff were
rewarded with comparatively high levels of professional autonomy. This
was something they valued highly.

   The importance of understanding schools as *systems* is demonstrated
very clearly. Each school represents a complex web of relationships that
have been established to meet a wide range of needs. Each subgroup
within a school has its own goals, values and norms – but these are
shaped by interaction with other parts of the system. The case is made
that it is not possible to affect any aspect of a school system without

fully appreciating the extent of this interdependence and complexity. So, for example, it is not possible to manage one important issue such as bullying in isolation from other key issues, such as the integration of students with special educational needs.

Other studies in the field already highlight the importance and interplay of factors within the individual, the peer group, the classroom, the school climate, the family and so forth. This study adds further detail about some of the structures and processes within school systems, and in particular the recursive cycles of interaction that shape beliefs, behaviours and relationships. It also provides an example of how these features of the school system can be identified in research.

Chapter 3 focuses on one part of the findings from the retrospective study with deaf adults. The conclusion drawn is that some bullying behaviour that occurs in groups may be the result of either ostracism or scapegoating. Another conclusion is that these are only two of the processes that (a) support the development or maintenance of groups and (b) may result in bullying behaviour.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how systemic thinking can be used to support data collection, data analysis and theory building in relation to complex psychosocial problems such as bullying. The first half of the chapter focuses on the way in which systemic constructs (such as boundaries) and systemic principles (such as neutrality, hypothesising and circular causality) were employed to develop a detailed understanding of the school system.

Making sense of individuals, dyads and groups

The second half of Chapter 4 charts the way in which six additional levels of the system were identified by employing the systemic principle of isomorphy. The overall result was an integrated, systemic model of school bullying.

Indeed, having identified ostracism and scapegoating as two processes relevant to bullying in groups, the question became one of how to understand the relationship between them. The difficulty was that ostracism and scapegoating are qualitatively different processes: one is construed as a conscious process, the other as an unconscious process. These theories are drawn from fundamentally different paradigms. A systemic model that is sufficiently flexible to house both types of process and both types of theory was found in the form of Agarzarian and Peters' (1981) model of the visible and invisible group. This suggests that groups have two simultaneous levels of functioning. At one level, individuals interact with others in the group as whole systems.

At the other level, they interact with one another as subsystems that serve the needs of the larger group system. When individuals relate as whole systems, the processes involved are conscious or can be made conscious. When they relate as subsystems, the processes involved are unconscious. Hence the terms the 'visible' and 'invisible' groups.

This way of construing group processes has significant implications for intervention, research and theory building. If some of the processes that produce bullying behaviour are unconscious, the children involved will not always be aware of how they are behaving or what is motivating them. Clearly, this requires a different type of intervention to those situations in which participants can be engaged in an explicit discussion of their behaviour. Similarly, if there are two simultaneous levels of functioning within the group, the methods used to collect and analyse data need to take this into account. They need to address the possibility that the children involved may not always be aware of their behaviour or what is motivating it. One implication for theory building is that stigmatisation, ostracism and scapegoating are only three of the processes that form part of the normal development or maintenance of the group. Other processes at both levels of functioning also result in bullying behaviour.

A second implication for theory building is that different bodies of knowledge will inform understanding of these different levels of functioning. For example, to understand the group that is functioning as a collection of individuals, one might draw upon theory from social psychology and personality psychology. To understand the group when people are functioning as subsystems that serve the larger group system, one might draw upon theory from psychoanalytic psychology or systemic thinking. Here, individuals may be construed as parts of a larger whole.

However, this way of construing group processes has consequences for theory building that go far beyond the peer group. According to the systemic principle of isomorphy, what is learnt about one level of the system may be applied to other levels of the system, as long as the particular nature of each level is taken into account. So, if the group has two qualitatively different levels of functioning, is the same true for dyadic relationships? The tentative conclusion drawn is 'yes'. Some of the processes that may produce bullying at both levels of the dyadic relationship are hypothesised. Instrumental aggression *may* be one source of bullying behaviour within the 'visible one-to-one relationship', whilst parasitic container–contained relationships *may* for example be one source of bullying behaviour within the 'visible one-to-one relationship'. The concept of parasitic container–contained

relationships introduces the idea that, whilst bullying behaviour may sometimes be the unfortunate by-product of the developmental and maintenance processes within a system, at other times bullying behaviour may also be the product of processes that have become positively pathological. Other processes involved in the development or maintenance of dyadic relationships may also result in bullying behaviour.

If it is accepted that both groups and dyads have two simultaneous levels of functioning, should this principle also be applied to the level of the system that is the individual child? Again, the conclusion drawn is 'yes'. For example, it is hypothesised that one factor at the level of the 'visible person' that may increase the risk of victimisation is if the child has limited ability to perform boundary-closing actions at a psychological level. Ideally, they would be able to use a range of cognitions to stabilise their system following input from other children. When a child has not developed this ability, they will be too open to the effects of other children's behaviour. If the aggressor's behaviour also results in incremental changes in their beliefs about themselves and their relationship, the victimised child may develop an increasingly external locus of control. In effect, as they become increasingly open to the effects of the aggressor's behaviour, the aggressor becomes able to destabilise the victim's system at will.

At the level of the 'invisible person', one factor that may increase the risk of a child behaving like a bully is their use of unconscious defences. It is assumed that most children periodically revert to the use of these defences but a minority may develop a personality structured around them. Finally, it is hypothesised that, if a child has a poorly consolidated sense-of-self-as-separate and also has difficulty employing cognitions to reduce the upset they experience as a result of other children's behaviour, they may be prone to apparently egocentric and oversensitive behaviour. These children may sometimes be characterised as provocative victims. However, whether a child actually adopts a particular role will depend on their interactions with other children: a child's personality represents only the *potential* to assume particular roles. Furthermore, while processes within the dyadic or group system represent the core processes that generate bullying behaviour, factors at other levels of the system shape the form this behaviour might take, increasing or reducing the likelihood of sustained or intense bullying.

So should the school also be regarded as a system with two simultaneous levels of functioning – one conscious, the other unconscious? In the analysis of the school study it was apparent that some groups

performed both implicit as well as explicit functions on behalf of the school as a whole. The analysis did not explore whether these implicit functions represented unconscious processes or simply unspoken agendas that could have been named by those involved, had they been asked. The possibility that large systems may have an unconscious level of functioning has implications for the way in which bullying is managed and may be worth further consideration.

In this model, parents are included as a subgroup within the school system. The family system is not discussed separately, although it is recognised as a profound influence on the personality of children at school. Families would be assumed to have an unconscious as well as a conscious level of functioning. It is also recognised that the community and political systems are highly relevant but these are not yet well developed aspects of the model.

It is important to note that each individual functions at several levels simultaneously. At an intrapersonal level, they have both conscious and unconscious levels of functioning. Within groups, they simultaneously operate as a complete system interacting with other individuals *and* as a subsystem of the group. In addition, they are likely to be members of dyads or small cliques; consequently, they will operate at both a conscious and unconscious level within those relationships as well. Processes at different levels of the system interact with one another, exacerbating or protecting against experiences of bullying.

However, more than one group or dyadic process that generates bullying behaviour may be at work at any given time. For example, a child who is deaf may be stigmatised and kept at the boundary of their peer group when the group feels under threat – perhaps on the move to secondary school. However, if that child then has an unfashionable haircut, for example, they might also be temporarily ostracised. They might also be locked into a parasitic container–contained relationship with another child.

To reiterate, the assumption is that bullying behaviour may sometimes be the unfortunate by-product of developmental or maintenance processes within dyadic or group systems, or it may be the product of processes that have become pathological. The form, intensity and duration of the behaviours generated by a particular process are shaped by processes and factors at a number of levels of the system. So no single theory will account for all cases of bullying. For example, one case of bullying behaviour might best be explained by Social Identity Development Theory (Nesdale, 2007), another by Owens *et al.*'s (2000) work on indirect aggression amongst teenage girls, another by stigmatisation and so forth.

This conceptualisation of bullying represents a flexible framework to support thinking: it is not a fixed model nor will it ever be 'complete'. Accounts of further processes that generate bullying behaviour need to be incorporated from the literature on bullying (and from elsewhere). One of the benefits of this model is that it can expand to incorporate additional theory. Indeed, almost any theory can be housed at one level or another. Theory can easily be integrated by asking the questions 'At which level of the system does this process sit', 'What function does this process play' and 'How does this process relate to other processes at that level?'

Personal theories of bullying

Although this model offers one particular way of thinking about bullying, it is clear that each person will develop their own conceptualisation of the problem. Chapter 5 explores the way in which individuals engage with theory to support their practice. Although there are an increasing number of integrated models of psychology, there are relatively few principles to help individuals integrate theories and constructs in their own work. Two studies were conducted with experienced psychologists to explore how they managed and integrated theory to solve problems in their practice. Participants in the first study had ten years' experience of psychology but no expertise in bullying. In a follow-up study, all participants were published authors in the field of school bullying.

Managing the available information

One conclusion was that the volume of information potentially relevant to academics and practitioners is increasing and this presents a problem for both the novice and the more experienced psychologist. The environment plays an important role in regulating the volume and diversity of information available to the novice. However, this function is gradually taken over by the individual as they develop strategies for filtering and managing potentially relevant information. Once an individual establishes their core affiliations to particular paradigms – often at university – they may go on to develop a rather conservative attitude towards additional or alternative perspectives and theories. Indeed, once a person establishes a particular response to a problem it is likely to become relatively fixed. This is not surprising given the cognitive effort and emotional discomfort involved in changing one's beliefs or assumptions. Furthermore, developing automatic responses

to familiar problems is very often an efficient, effective approach to
problem solving.

Both studies highlighted the extent to which people varied in the
paradigms and theories they used in their practice; the specific con-
cepts they employed from any particular perspective; and the way in
which they organised, integrated and applied theory. It was notable that
entire paradigms could be dismissed on the basis that an individual did
not find them sufficiently interesting or because a perspective did not
resonate with their personal ideals. Unfortunately, this approach to the-
ory potentially disregards whole levels of a child's system that may be
relevant when trying to solve problems in practice. The danger is that
interventions are then guided by the personal preferences of the practi-
tioner rather than by a comprehensive assessment of the active elements
in each child's case.

The range of approaches to integrating theory

However, when an individual does accept new ideas (which is more
likely the more experienced they become), the question becomes one
of how to integrate these within their current thinking. The two stud-
ies suggested three main approaches to integrating theory. The first
approach is to allow ideas to simply coexist. It is clear that one does
not need a detailed understanding of the relationship between theor-
etical concepts in order to use them in practice. The next level of inte-
gration is to loosely organise theories in relation to one another. For
those participants working as practitioners, this was usually managed
within some form of systemic framework, although it was not uncom-
mon for people to have a system of organisation personal to them. The
most detailed level of integration involves developing a precise under-
standing of the relationship between specific paradigms, theories or
concepts.

Those people who did try to develop a more precise understanding of
the relationships between ideas often described the process as difficult
and uncomfortable but ultimately rewarding. Nonetheless, not every-
one is prepared to make this effort or suffer this discomfort. Integrating
theory is a process that shares much in common with descriptions of
acquiring expertise. In other words, those individuals who do integrate
theory repeatedly identified gaps in their understanding of theoretical
relationships and refined their mental representations until they pro-
vided better support for problem solving in practice. It is likely that
integrating ideas often involves creative thinking and all the stages