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Persistent bullying and the influence of turning points: learnings from an instrumental case study

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ABSTRACT

Persistent bullying behavior is that which starts high and remains either moderately high or persistently high, seemingly in spite of intervention/prevention approaches employed: yet little is known about how/why persistent bullying emerges or is sustained. Those who do not respond to interventions and persist with their bullying behavior, require close consideration and more targeted, nuanced approaches. This instrumental case-study uniquely explores a self-identified, high-persistent bully's explanations of how the bullying emerged, and what supported/sustained it to become a persistent behavior. A whole-of-life interview protocol facilitated a reflective exploration of the participant's social and behavioral 'turning points': the influence of transitions and changes in one's life: serving to initially steer him toward bullying others, and eventually sustaining his persistent bullying behavior over time. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) revealed three 'turning points' which seemingly met his primary personal and social goals/needs of belonging, social positioning and status. This paper adds to the literature by introducing the notion of 'turning points' as a possible mechanism that facilitates the emergence of, and sustains persistent negative/bullying behaviors. Understanding turning points and any chain reactions in the lives of those who engage in higher, persistent levels of bullying can inform the development of future measures, intervention approaches and provide insights into issues of care for individuals engaging in persistent bullying.

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Introduction/Background

Bullying is a complex social relationship problem usually involving repeated, deliberate intent to hurt/harm utilising power differences to intimidate or distress another (Olweus, 1978). By definition, it is ongoing, and usually measured against a certain frequency (e.g. every day) and period of time (e.g. during the past school term). Despite decades of research, bullying remains a global concern due to long-term negative personal, social, emotional, academic, and

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economic impacts (UNESCO, 2019). Each year in Australia, 543,000 perpetrators instigate more than 45 million bullying incidents and almost 25% of students (est. 910,000) experience bullying while at school. This is estimated to cost the community \$2.3 billion: incurred at school and 20-years post-graduation (Price Waterhouse Cooper Consulting Australia Pty Ltd, 2018). Globally, 'almost one in three students (32%) has been bullied by their peers at school at least once in the last month' with physical bullying the most common in all countries except Europe and North America (UNESCO, 2019, p. 8). Interestingly, 'in all regions except Europe and North America, physical bullying is the most common and sexual bullying is the second most common type of bullying. In Europe and North America, psychological bullying is the most common type of bullying' (p.7). Whilst we know some of the long-term effects of engaging in bullying behaviors (Skrzypiec et al., 2012), little is known or understood concerning what sustains ongoing, high-level bullying.

Persistence and trajectories

Whilst the definition assumes bullying occurs over time, Sharp et al. (2000) argued the importance of distinguishing between 'long-term' bullying and shorter term bullying, particularly the different approaches required for resolving and reconstructing relationships (Pepler, 2006). Schaeffer et al. (2003, p. 1021) used the term *persistent* to describe children exhibiting aggressive behavior for two or more years; and *desistent* for children who ceased aggressive behavior at or within 1 year. Wrenn Carlson and Cornell (2008) in a two-year study of middle-school bullying, examined differences between persistent (two+ years) and desistent (<1 year) bullies, finding persistent bullies (PB) 'had the most aggressive attitudes and were more likely to get into trouble in school than desistent bullies or control students' (p. 442). Further, they queried whether the persistent group was similar to serial bullies (Chan, 2006) previously identified in a cross-sectional study, where persistence over time could not be measured.

Pepler et al. (2008), in a longitudinal study, identified four bullying pathways/trajectories from eight waves of data over 7 years ($N = 871$, aged 10–14 years) suggesting more sustained bullying relationships/behaviors. They found 35.1% reported bullying at consistently moderate levels (moderate-persistent); 9.9% reported consistently high levels (high-persistent); 13.4% reported moderate and desisting levels of bullying over time; and 41.6% reported almost never bullying.

Agee (2020) argued, however, that *most* bullying is *desistent*, as the limited studies on persistent bullying to date indicate that most children in middle and early-middle-school years who engage in bullying, *do not continue* in subsequent years. Skrzypiec et al. (2018) however, followed three cohorts of South Australian students from 7th–11th grades (12–16 years of age) and found that whilst some involvement in bullying continued, new bullies and victims emerged during each school year, further complicating the picture. Those

who persist with bullying over time, however, while only a small population, represent a problematic sub-set that appears to be unresponsive to prevention and intervention strategies (Pepler et al., 2008).

The challenge

Whilst prevalence estimates have informed understanding of the size and nature of the bullying problem, and individual and group factors in schools have been explored over the past three decades; qualitative research more recently has begun to examine those settings and its actors, yet, the lived experiences of those who *persistently* bully others remain largely ignored.

Qualitative work in sociology, education, and anthropology has examined bullying from ethnographic, discourse and grounded theory perspectives. For example, Lam and Liu (2007) explored how eight secondary students commenced/stopped their bullying behavior. Thornberg's (2011) narrative review presented the complexity and social construction of school culture, social hierarchies, and power among students. Spears and Kofoed (2013) called on the field of psychology to acknowledge youth as knowledge brokers and facilitate voice to help further understandings of cyberbullying in particular, and Schott and Söndergaard (2014) called for bullying to be considered as a more socially and culturally complex phenomenon. Green et al. (2022) in one of the first *qualitative* meta-studies in this domain, examined a suite of studies utilising co-participatory approaches of dealing with bullying, demonstrating how new understandings can be found by drawing qualitative studies together in a systematic, meta-analytic way. However, the lived experiences, awareness of, and rationale for, sustaining and maintaining bullying behaviors over and above 2 years as defined by Schaeffer et al. (2003) and Wrenn Carlson and Cornell's (2008) studies have not been examined *qualitatively* to date. A more nuanced understanding of the lives of those students who persist in bullying others could further theory and knowledge of how and why bullying emerges, and the factors which serve to sustain/maintain these negative behaviors.

Through the use of an instrumental case study approach, this paper uniquely explores the life-events of one self-identified persistent bully (PB): which have contributed to, shaped and sustained his persistent bullying trajectory. It introduces the notion of *turning points* (TPs): those experiences/events where the bullying pathway could have, did, or did not change direction.

Turning points

Within mathematics, a TP is the point at which the graph 'turns around' and changes direction. Drawing on a resilience framework, Urry et al. (2014) in their report of TPs in the lives of vulnerable young people stated that 'its [TPs] defining feature, is that *it causes change and*

influences subsequent events in a young person's life' (p. 7). Derived from the life course perspective in the sociological domain (Elder, 1998) TPs are a key developmental theory used to describe the influence of *transitions and changes in individual lives over time* (Crosnoe & Huston, 2007). King et al. (2003) also noted TPs as *critical junctures* (Mandelbaum, 1973), *life events* (Cohler, 1987), or *epiphanies* (Denzin, 1989). They noted that TPs can be positive or negative; cumulative or sudden, single episodes; gradual understandings or sudden illuminations; personal subjective experiences; or situational life events.

TPs are thus events or incidents which can create change in behavior and have a lasting effect on a person by either: *shutting down or opening opportunities* (e.g. dropping out of school at a young age, moving schools often) or *involving a lasting change in an individual's environment* (e.g. a move, transition or death of a significant other) (Rutter, 1996). Multiple TPs can lead to a positive/negative '*chain reaction*' (Green & Price, 2016): with the potential to change one's life course.

Bullying prevention/intervention approaches in schools signify a need for behavioral change: thus, they represent a potential *TP for most students involved* those who *respond* to the strategy with a resultant change in their [bullying] behavior (e.g. *desisters*) *cease; but those who do not persist*.

This paper extends prior research by presenting a voice largely missing in literature: an instrumental case study of a *PB [John, pseudonym]*. His lived experiences/events, including TPs which served to shape and maintain his bullying behavior over the course of his schooling are explored.

Methodology

This paper presents one instrumental case-study from a larger two-phase, qualitative, interpretative study exploring persistent bullying and its drivers.

- Phase 1: an *open-ended, qualitative, exploratory survey* gathered community views of persistent bullying ($N = 296$): *109 teachers/counsellors from Reception (students aged 5 years) to Grade 9 (students aged 13/14 years); 113 students from Reception (students aged 5 years) to Grade 9 (students aged 13/14 years) and 74 parents*
- Phase 2: a *multiple, instrumental case study* ($N = 4$ young adult preservice teachers) comprising individuals who self-identified as having engaged in bullying behavior whilst at school. Utilising Salmivalli's (1999) participant roles as an organising framework, the following roles were identified: persistent victim, bully/victim; desister, and *persistent bully*

Instrumental case study

Case studies are analytic, rather than enumerative investigations of a specified or bounded phenomenon, and are designed to gain deep understanding of *particular instances* of phenomena [i.e. persistent bullying]. *Instrumental* case studies: illuminate a particular issue or build theory and facilitate understanding of something else through in-depth analyses (Mills et al., 2010); and provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences, adding depth and voice to extant data, to help connect the micro level (actions of an individual) to the macro level (larger-scale social structures and processes) (Vaughan, 1992).

Yin (2018) argued that case studies enable researchers to explore the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of a phenomenon, namely, persistent bullying. According to Yazan (2015, p. 140) in a review of three different approaches to case study research, Yin emphasised a structured approach, and the importance of ‘including theoretical propositions regarding the case under study, *before starting to collect any data*, thus distinguishing it from grounded theory and ethnographic methodologies’. Yin’s approach also measures the *quality of the case study design* against four criteria, namely, *construct* (through triangulation; chains of evidence and member checking); *internal* (through use of established analytic approaches such as pattern matching); and *external validity* (through analytic generalization) and *reliability* (through case study protocols and data bases) (Yazan, 2015). By employing an instrumental case study approach, this study links the individual experience of a self-identified, persistent bully to the psychosocial context, systems and structures that support and maintain the behaviors. By utilising existing theory as an analytic framework, i.e. resilience, new insights emerged about those who persist in bullying others, maintaining and sustaining their behaviors over extended periods of time.

Participants and recruitment

Recruiting children and young people who have specifically engaged in bullying at school presents clear ethical concerns, so adult preservice teachers enrolled in an initial education program who perceived/self-reported that *they had engaged in bullying behavior whilst at school* were invited to participate (purposive, convenience sampling). Following University ethics committee and Head of School approvals, invitational emails were sent to all preservice teachers attending undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at a University in South Australia. Of the six who voluntarily responded, two did not meet the final inclusion criteria, and the remaining four ($M = 1$; $F = 3$; aged 21–26 years) self-identified individually as a: *persistent victim*; *bully/victim*; *desister*; and *persistent bully [PB]*.

The PB case-study of John [pseudonym] is the focus of this paper. He was a 26-year-old preservice teacher, who on reviewing the criteria of all

participant roles, self-identified as a PB, voluntarily giving voice to his experiences, and contributing a unique perspective largely missing from literature. Active informed consent, the right to withdraw or not answer questions and what would happen to data were explained. To ensure John was comfortable sharing his experiences, general conversation was employed to establish a rapport and safe space, and contact details were provided to him for the University's counselling service, along with other national support groups.

Retrospective data collection and bias

At the beginning of his 50-minute audio-recorded, face-to-face interview, John explained/defined his understanding of bullying, which provided the contextual/cultural positioning for his account of his school-life experiences. As the definition may have been influenced not only by his schooling but also his teacher education training and other adult-life experiences, it is important to acknowledge and consider potential biases which could be present in the data.

Recall or response bias is defined as 'the type of bias that often occurs when an individual reports a past behavior or event (American Psychology Association, 2023) and refers to not accurately remembering events/experiences or omitting details. The accuracy and volume of memories may also be influenced by subsequent events and experience (Macbain Foundation, 2023).

Morse (1991), however noted participants who elect to recollect are usually articulate, reflective and willing to share their experiences: which may also introduce some social desirability bias: the tendency to present oneself in a more favourable/socially acceptable way to others, rather than to give completely accurate answers.

Hardt and Rutter (2004) and Smith (2014) argued, however, that retrospective data collection has a valuable place in research, as the reflections and recollections, whilst not forming a full historical account (Silverman, 2017), do *sit historically in the context of the person's lived schooling [in this case, bullying] experiences*. In this study, the participant's ability to reflect on his school life *in its entirety*, rather than bullying/victimization events alone, was facilitated through the use of the unique, specifically designed visual interview placemat/protocol (see below for detail). This whole-of-life protocol provided opportunities for contextualizing personal experiences of bullying and victimization with other familial and friendship circumstances, delimiting the potential for not remembering or specifically omitting details. Recall and social desirability bias was countered and minimised by this approach together with the in-interview checking for meaning and clarity, by the researcher. This paper focuses on aspects of his narrative relative to how his bullying behavior emerged and was sustained. As cyberbullying was not known when the participant was a student, it is outside the focus of this paper.

Methods and interview instruments

A researcher-designed, theoretically informed (Bronfenbrenner's, 1979) visual interview placemat/template, *About Your Life*, was designed to empower the participant to have choice and control over the data collection/interview process. Illustrated headings were used on the placemat/template to facilitate free-flowing conversation and discussion: namely, *proudest moments and biggest regrets; likes and dislikes; family; behavior at home and school; friends; your school; bullying; and 'anything else'*. The participant/John selected the topics, sequence and degree of information he wanted to share about his life and life events. In addition, specific questions about bullying were explored: *why they believed some students persistently bully others; what they understood bullying to be; and if they were aware of the roles in the peer group when bullying occurred* (e.g. bystander, victim, bully/victim, bully, desister and PB). To ensure legitimacy and credibility of the analyses, the narratives and interpretations were confirmed/validated with the participants as part of the interview process (Creswell, 2012). This form of in-interview member checking reflects Yin's (2018) approach to case study design previously noted, where validity and reliability are determined variously through triangulation to other data/literature; clear chains of evidence; pattern-matching and structured approaches to analyses.

Data analysis

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was adopted for the larger study (Smith & Osborn, 2015, pp. 41–42), then collectively, all key learnings from four cases were brought together (See Green & Price, 2016), with John's case reported here.

Conversations/interviews were recorded, transcribed and entered into NVIVO (2020). Data were read, general notes made in relation to *a priori* codes drawn from the literature and emergent data relating specifically to persistent bullying and TPs were identified (*topic coding*) (Richards, 2005). A more in-depth reading considered the semantics to understand what bullying and persistent bullying was like for John. Data were coded into more abstract themes before looking for connections within this and across other narratives (*analytical analysis*) (Richards, 2005). Commonalities and differences were later used to develop a profile that described the characteristics of individual cases (Phase 2, not reported here).

Transcripts were checked by colleagues for trustworthiness of coding with high consistency of interpretation reported: differences were discussed until agreement was reached. Member checking was carried out during the interview directly with John: e.g. were the experiences fully and accurately captured, and whether the final interpretation did justice to his experience. Direct quotes are

embedded in the text to demonstrate the relationships between claims and data, adding credibility to the interpretations made (Freeman et al., 2007).

Findings and discussion

Consistent with Lyons and Coyle's approach (Lyons & Coyle, 2007), to establish context for the discussion which followed: John's understanding of the concept of bullying is outlined first, including his self-identification of his role as a (PB); followed by an exploration of his schooling experiences. Each of the three major findings relating to potential TPs in John's trajectory over time are then considered. His own words provide an interpretative commentary throughout, illuminating his reflections on his experience of persistent bullying.

Knowledge and understanding of bullying

In response to the questions posed about bullying generally, John described bullying as [when]: *a student or a few students make[ing] another student feel bad . . . or do[ing] bad things to the other student . . . for some sort of satisfaction . . . or some sort of gain*. He clearly recognized the intent to hurt/harm behind bullying behavior, and he also significantly highlighted the bully's motivation: *to gain satisfaction or some other gain*. Not uncommonly, he neglected to identify the notion of repetition. This understanding of bullying being deliberate and involving a power relationship underpinned the conversations which followed about his own behaviors and what motivations might have been sustaining/maintaining them.

Pepler et al.'s (2008) four bullying trajectories were subsequently discussed/reviewed: (1) rarely engaging in bullying; (2) starting on an upward trajectory of bullying but desisting; (3) starting and remaining either moderately high, or (4) persistently high. John reflected that at the start of his schooling: he perceived he was a *victim* of bullying. Yet by the end of his first year, he stated *I had commenced bullying others*, subsequently describing himself as *high-persistent*: engaging in high levels of bullying throughout the remainder of his schooling.

I remember going to detention all the time and seeing the same kids . . . and we would talk in class and it was sort of like a group . . . you know . . . like 'the detention kids' . . . oh what did you do? . . . so yeh. . . we didn't really care.

Not caring, or having little empathic awareness of his actions on others, is well recognized as a characteristic of bullying (Olweus, 1991, 1994). His further descriptions of constantly being reprimanded and suspended from school for his bullying behavior confirmed this persistence across and within different school settings. John appeared to be immune to any sanctions imposed and described them in positive terms: as actually helping to create his social

standing and reputation among his peers, rather than encouraging him to cease and desist (see Green & Price, 2016 for further elaboration).

Context/Background

John attended several co-educational independent schools ranging from relatively small primary schools to quite large high schools. John's mother taught at the schools he attended and whilst she never taught him directly, he recalled early memories of ... *being sent to her room when I was misbehaving*. John changed school each time his mother did, leading to numerous, challenging transitions which he recognized potentially contributed to difficult peer relationships. He did not enjoy school and struggled to make friends explaining that ... *if I was another student, [i.e. not the son of a teacher], I probably would have enjoyed it*. His relationships outside of school were also fraught, likely due to the constant moves, leaving him feeling isolated early on and lacking a sense of belonging to any school community.

John, by his own recollection and reflection, was a child whose schooling and peer relationships were often interrupted and disrupted, and who changed participant roles from victim to bully in the space of one year: sustaining that negative behavior in the years following, on a pathway of persistent bullying.

Skrzypiec et al. (2018) noted, the likelihood of a student engaging in bullying for the first time in the first 4 years of high school was 16%, however this increased to 54.5% if the student was already bullying prior to high school, i.e. in 7th grade. They argued that the 'significant predictors of being a bully during high school were gender (male) and being a bully in 7th grade' (p. 15). It is evident that for John, his early adoption of bullying behaviors at the end of the first year of school set him up for continued bullying lasting through his teen years. It is with this disrupted schooling context and sustained bullying behavior in mind, that the TPs emerged: those circumstances which set him off on a different pathway, or served to maintain his negative behavior.

Turning points

Three key aspects emerged in John's narrative about his school-life which *created/led to changes in behavior and had a lasting effect on him* (Rutter, 1996):

- *peer rejection and lack of belonging;*
- *engaging in bullying; and*
- *social positioning/status and reputation*

These TPs demonstrate the social and behavioral mechanisms which not only facilitated John's bullying behaviors but also served to maintain them over time.

First turning point: peer rejection and lack of belonging

... at lunchtime the students were saying 'no ... no ... you have to run away from him'

Peer rejection and victimization commenced when John started school. He recalled being socially rejected and ostracized by them as he was *much bigger* in stature than his peers, and that this continued throughout his schooling, resulting in him feeling a lack of belonging and connectedness to others. He recalled:

It was sort of a game ... to run away from me ... [and] ... every lunchtime ... I remember one time I got so upset I ran out of the school grounds crying and they came and found me and told the teacher '[John] is out of bounds' ... you know you've got to tell him off ...

These feelings often resulted in school refusal: *I didn't want to go to school*. However, he also reflected that he would do *anything* to belong and have friends: which eventually included bullying others in response. This is reflected in Laird et al. (2001) who note that repeated rejection may lead to more anti-social behavior. John's initial response to victimization was indeed anti-social: to bully others, potentially, establishing him as a bully-victim. Kennedy (2021) notes that this category is often found to be the most dysfunctional and at highest risk: for emotional and behavioral disorders; more behavioral problems, misconduct, more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem. Often, they are perceived as social outcasts and provoke more negative reactions, and experience higher levels of loneliness. John's pathway from his first year at school was not looking positive.

However, John reflected that at this young age, he was so keen to be included, he engaged in bullying: which initially, for him, was *more for fun* ... a way of connecting ... stating ... *I didn't realize they were so hurt ... at the time*. This need to belong and be accepted is recognized as a 'fundamental innate motivator' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 520). Links found between rejection and aggression (Leary et al., 2006) suggest the need to belong can provide a strong drive to bully others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), something that was evident throughout John's narrative.

Thus, John experienced *his first TP* early in his schooling: after feeling rejected and ostracized for his size, he responded by victimizing others, but experienced *the power of bullying others for fun*. In turn, it gave him a connection, albeit negative, with his peers, thus serving his social goals/needs of *being included* in play.

The tension between John's use of bullying behaviors to serve an adaptive function (socially productive/inclusion) for him, as compared to his peers' views that his acts were anti-social, is not uncommon (Twenge & Campbell, 2003), and serves to perpetuate the division and ongoing rejection. It also raises the issue

of intent: initially, he engaged 'for fun', but as will be seen later, other motives emerged.

John's constant schooling moves as his mother took contract teaching work, exacerbated his peer relationship difficulties. He described never being in a school long enough to establish or maintain friendships; meaning he likely failed to develop the most basic relationship initiation/peer-group-entry, and maintenance skills. John recalled often being paired with new students, yet after a day or so, the peer group encouraged the new student to exclude him, leaving him again feeling rejected further compounding his lack of belonging and isolation.

One time a new kid came and the teacher said oh '[John] can you come and show this student around' ... I think it was, ... trying to make friends ... and for the first day or so he was ... but then at lunchtime the students were saying 'no you have to run away from him' ... and so he sort of said 'oh okay' and joined in so that was the end of that.

The teacher's well-meaning but unsuccessful inclusion attempts reinforced John's feelings of loneliness and rejection highlighting the need for teachers/counsellors to be really aware of the peer dynamics and social power structures of their classes/contexts.

As Maccoby (1990) noted, '*social behavior ... is never a function of the individual ... it is a function of the interaction between two or more persons*' (p. 513). Peers and particularly friends teach and refine each other's social skills, however, without enough time in a school and opportunities to learn and rehearse these crucial relationship skills, John, by his own account, *remained unsuccessful in peer relationships throughout my schooling*. Notably, John disclosed he had *never had a best friend* and recalled only one short-lived friendship during his schooling.

A guy from South Africa just came in year 8 ... we eventually became friends and he was very good with the words that he would come up with ... and he was also a very big guy ... there was one time where that friend and I turned against each other by the end of year 8 ... and he ended up moving up a year level to year 9.

John explained that having ... *some interaction* ... with his peers, whether negative or positive, was important to him. Bullying up to that point, had been, in his words ... *light-hearted* ... *that got the whole class to laugh* ... which he believed demonstrated he was accepted and belonged, thus providing the connection that he longed for. This resonated with John's limited conceptualization of bullying: *doing bad things to others for some sort of satisfaction/gain*. Yet this behavior from their perspective served to further isolate him from his peers, contributing to other relationship difficulties with teachers, parents and the wider school community. This clearly highlights the need for teachers/counsellors to acknowledge the bully, victim and bully-victim perspectives as early as possible, and to recognize the motivations behind the behaviors

might not initially be a deliberate intent to hurt/harm, but something more aligned with needing connection with others.

This first TP: *being rejected and isolated early and consistently over time*, set a pattern of new behavior in motion: of *behaving like a bully*, initially to make others laugh (i.e. *gain satisfaction*). However, eventually this became a means to an end: a functional behavior designed to gain him status and acceptance.

Second turning point: striving to belong through bullying

... *Everyone versus John*

John tried to belong, to feel like he fitted in and was an important member of a group. In his first year of school, John allowed his peers to physically wrestle him, explaining:

I was much bigger than those other boys . . . we would do some sort of wrestling so . . . everyone versus [John] . . . sort of thing . . . physically.

By the end of the first year of school, John had, however, started bullying others physically: gaining satisfaction through generating laughter among his peers; and using his size to exercise physical power; something that then continued throughout his schooling. He recalled:

I remember this one scene where I pulled his hair back . . . and hit him . . . and then threw his shoe over the fence and stuff.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified the strong drive to belong, arguing that the desire for power is often motivated by a need to escape loneliness. John believed that his disruptive and bullying behaviors, premised upon power differences, *entertained his peers, and provided him with some acceptance and sense of belonging*. He believed it enhanced his social standing in the class and provided status and reputation among his peer group which was important to him. At this point, a clear intent to harm was not evident.

A link between power, status and belonging is evident in literature. Some argue that bullying is motivated by a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) while others have focused on the need to gain and maintain status (Sijtsema et al., 2009). Both are relevant for John. Bullying results in the victim becoming more *powerless* while the bully gains a reputation of being *powerful* thus enhancing their status (Craig & Pepler, 2003). For John, this appeared to setup a cycle: he continued to bully and misbehave, fulfilling other's expectations [*you are a bully*], and developed the sense of misguided belonging and status he perceived this behavior gave him among his peers. This self-fulfilling cycle seemingly confirmed his identity in the class and to himself: as *trouble* and *bad*; an identity that John readily and still reported years later.

At this early stage of schooling, there were opportunities for the bullying to cease: John could have potentially stopped bullying, had his peer relationships and friendships developed more positively; however, this *second TP of striving to*

belong through bullying others, whilst initially for fun, reinforced his persistent trajectory and growing identity and reputation as a bully.

Third turning point: social positioning/status and reputation

... the trouble kid ...

The third TP involved issues of social positioning/status, reputation, and self-concept. Developing a positive identity and reputation among his peers became increasingly important to John as he matured and was a consistent theme throughout his interview. The need to gain attention from peers and others while increasing his social positioning and status appeared to underpin his acquired bullying behavior, and clearly reflected his conceptualisation of bullying as noted earlier. Consequently, his teachers and peers perceived and treated him as *... trouble ...* a descriptive that featured strongly in these self-descriptions years later.

When asked how his parents, teachers, peers and the school community would describe him, John explained that they *expected him to do the wrong thing* and referred to him as *troubled ... or the trouble kid who is bad ... that's who I am you know* and *a bully*. John explained:

I was the student that would get into trouble and that involved ... making other students feel bad ... I remember in reception I would steal people's lunches from them while they were eating ... I would fit in that [moderate to high levels of bullying] category from the beginning ...

The attitude and behavior of the school community *in response* to his actions, served as the *third TP* enhancing his self-image, as he struggled to belong and feel connected. A cycle developed whereby he continued to bully and misbehave to fulfil these expectations. As a result, he was increasingly reprimanded and became part of *... a group ... you know ... like 'the detention kids'*. This further served to enhance his social standing and elevate his negative reputation among the peer group and school community: while also providing a sense of connectedness with similar others.

As Bandura (1977) identified, interactions and relationships with others play a crucial role in the formation of one's behavior and self-concept. Reciprocal determinism, where three factors influence behavior is also pertinent here: how the individual thinks and feels; how the environment reacts/intersects; and the behavior itself (Bandura, 1978). *Persistent* bullying now served to maintain John's social positioning, reputation, power and status among his peers, and was thus an *adaptive* behavior for him (Ellis et al., 2011), serving a clear purpose in his mind which had positive outcomes: *his social positioning; belonging and connectedness to the/a community*. The need to belong and feel connected was so strong that this third TP motivated John to *continue* bullying. He actively sought confirmation from others as to his bullying status by acting in a way that confirmed peers' views and fulfilled their expectations (Myers, 2010), rejecting

anything that contradicted it. North and Swann (2009) argue that this process helps an individual gain a sense of equilibrium as they shift between verification and alienation.

Sanctions and reprimands were unimportant as long as he had *status* [as a bully]; a sense of *belonging* [among similar peers] and *connectedness* [to the community of *trouble kids*].

Any prevention and intervention policies and practices in place, such as *special programs on what bullying is... the impact of bullying ...* really did not deter John as they did not relate to his prime motivation: *I would do anything to belong*. The schools approached John's problematic behavior through *detentions and suspensions* which inadvertently contributed to supporting his identity formation, peer status and power *as a bully*: they did not, however, interrupt the cycle of bullying or address his motivations. These strategies not only failed to address the problem of his behavior; they also created an iatrogenic effect: an unintended adverse outcome of a treatment (Healy, 2020) which sustained the continuation of the bullying on a persistent trajectory.

Turning points summary

It is important to note that throughout discussions with John, empathy or consideration for victims was limited which is not uncommon when talking with those who bully others (e.g. Olweus, 1991, 1994). John's sole focus was on *himself interacting in some way* with those around him.

What is uniquely presented here, is the identification of three TPs which can only be understood as the result of a holistic school-life-experience narrative. In summary, John's life experience of school, involved: *constant peer rejection; a lack of belonging; and elevated negative status*. These TPs put John on a trajectory from having been initially victimized due to his difference in size, towards adopting a bullying persona as he grew and developed: initially bullying for fun and to entertain others in exchange for acceptance and status, but eventually *as the only way he knew to engage and connect with his peers*.

Moving forward: a chain reaction of turning points

A chain reaction is a cluster of TPs that together positively/negatively influence an individual's life course (Rutter, 1996). Risk factors such as early rejection, frequent school moves, numerous failed attempts at being accepted and persistent bullying led to a reputation of John being a 'trouble kid'; something that he readily recalled when asked how his parents, teachers and others viewed him.

The current authors argue that together these TPs created a *chain reaction* which shaped John's bullying trajectory: reinforcing his emerging persistent bullying behavior. TPs, events which bring about change in behavior, have rarely been discussed in relation to bullying (Green & Price, 2016). However,

Tholander et al. (2020) recently focused on *positive* TPs that have helped *victims* cope. This reflects the more common understanding of resilience: of being able to bounce back from adversity (Rutter, 1996). This study, however, argues that *TPs may equally operate to create persistent bullying trajectories*, and offers new insights about pathways of aggression, bullying and violence.

John's lived experiences as a PB highlight the powerful role that connection and belonging play. Combined with contextual situations, such as frequently moving schools, which interfere with and disrupt the development of interpersonal relationship skills; friendships; and others' perceptions, rejections, expectations and labels, a school-life course is set in action which potentially, initially steers a child towards bullying behavior: and then on a trajectory of persistent bullying once those behaviors are reinforced. Interventions which failed to address his prime motivation and needs would thus fail to alter his trajectory.

The following summary of the potential factors that influenced John's persistent bullying trajectory is presented below (see Figure 1 and Green & Price, 2016, for further information). It demonstrates the chain reactions: the sequences of impacts and TPs which have served to change John's trajectory toward increased bullying, and thereby supported it over time.

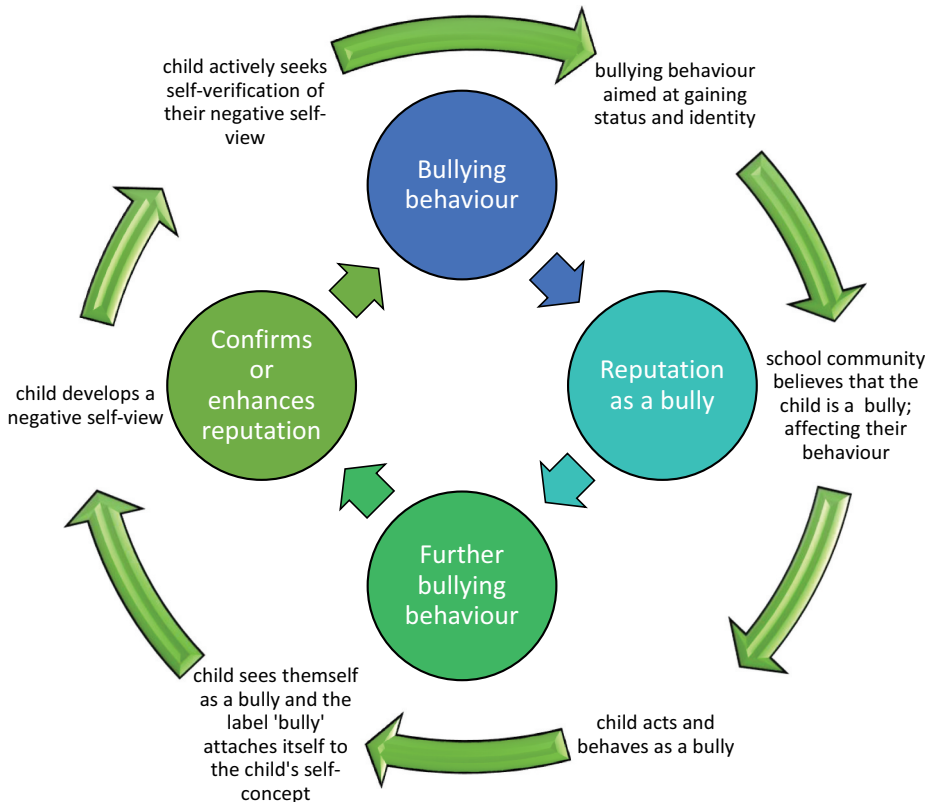


Figure 1. Conceptualization of the factors that support persistent bullying (Green, 2015).

Limitations and strengths

The use of purposive and extreme case sampling is often considered a limitation when viewed through a quantitative lens, as results are not generalizable. They are not intended to be. They are, however, intended to add to knowledge and nuance through the breadth and depth of an individual's lived experience of the phenomenon. The use of reflection and recollection as data, is also often considered too context-specific to have general relevancy. Hardt and Rutter (2004) argue that retrospective data collection is valuable in research as it remains within the time/space context of the person's life. Having found that participants' recall of key events and specific types of bullying was constant, Rivers (2001) purported that 'memory stability may be a useful indicator of reliability' (p. 129). As this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the TPs in one PB's life, these sampling strategies are strengths: John was able to reflect on his entire school life, revealing the extent of the impact rejection and bullying has had: *my whole schooling life was just trouble*. By comparison, children in surveys, can only articulate their current experiences on a scale, and lack the insights afforded by analysis of a contextual whole.

While it is recognized that case studies are subjective in nature and reliant on the researcher's interpretation, this subjectivity forms part of the framework of case studies and is an essential element in understanding the case or phenomenon. Subjectivity in this instance is not considered a limitation, rather, a valuable element in the construction of meaning (Stake, 1995). Most importantly, meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant, so that the final understanding is clear and represents the participant's perspective. Levitt (2021) presents the notion of a *qualitative generalization* suggesting that it is 'rooted in a cycle of inferential processes that identify forms of stability and variation in their data' (p. 95). These cycles 'reflect the practice and experience of the phenomena under study: a logic describing *generalization to the phenomenon*, not the population' (p. 95). The phenomenon under study here, is that of the PB. Levitt (2021) suggests that 'instead of seeking variation within a sample that mirrors a population, qualitative research *identifies forms of variation that mirror the experience or practice of the phenomenon under study*' (p. 95). In this way, John's case provides unique experiences which contribute to further understanding persistent bullying.

Conclusions

My whole schooling life was just trouble. . . . Who the student thinks they are is a big part

PB is an under-researched issue that is worthy of future research. We have innovatively applied, through IPA, aspects of a *resilience* framework to the field of bullying, specifically the emerging field of persistent bullying: by identifying TPs

associated with John's lived/life experience/s as a self-identified PB. The learnings from this instrumental case study, applying a whole of life perspective, provided deep insight into the individual lived experiences and enabled a deeper exploration of the persistently high bullying trajectory which revealed TPs and chain reactions that seemingly shaped John's bullying behavior. John's narrative contributes new knowledge by providing a missing voice: that of a self-identified PB. By listening to his theorizing, his own analysis, and his reflections (Grzanka & Moradi, 2021), we have moved beyond simply gathering and representing a marginalized voice, to gaining insights into the possible reasons why he maintained his bullying behavior. In doing so, we have shifted the power to the participant, engaging him as a co-producer of knowledge: he decided how and what to speak about elicited through the *About Your Life* template. He has enlightened us about the TPs in his schooling which set him on the career path of a PB.

Informing our understanding of persistent bullying within an educational context, John's narrative signified the importance of shaping one's own identity and sense of self, thereby he established, confirmed and maintained an identity as a *troubled kid, a bully and I'm bad ... that's who I am ...*. Subsequently, bullying provided him with adaptive benefits: a place in the peer group, a sense of status/social positioning and feeling of belonging, making it seemingly unlikely that he would stop (Ellis et al., 2011). Gaining insight into what matters for a PB, that is recognition by peers: social status and reputation, and whilst negative, connection to them, revealed that for John stopping bullying behavior would potentially challenge achieving a sense of belonging within the educational community, through *loss of peer connection and social position*. John contended that students persistently bully because they need to maintain their identity [as a bully] and sense of belonging within the peer group. This raises significant implications for those with pastoral care and educational responsibilities for bullying policy, practice and provision of care in co-producing knowledge to further develop safe educational communities and environments for all members. Drawing on John's insights, future approaches need to incorporate listening to and understanding the specific lived experiences, desires and needs of individuals, as well as the broader socio-ecological influences, particularly those impacting on peer relationships (Price & Green, 2016).

Educational intervention/prevention and pastoral care approaches may benefit from approaches that are underpinned by positive rather than deficit/punitive perspectives of those who bully, through understanding how bullying behavior may be motivated and reinforced by the strong need to gain acceptance and recognition, viewing any attention as better than none (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sijtsema et al., 2009). The imperative for addressing bullying includes recognizing the impact of rejection on an individual's wellbeing through experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, isolation, and loneliness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thereby early intervention and proactive preventative community approaches fostering acceptance, recognition, safety and belonging

inclusive of all, and ongoing monitoring is important. A key learning from this study is understanding that bullying, in John's case, potentially acted as a survival function: a *buffer to a life of rejection*: a social-behavioral mechanism that protected him socially and emotionally from the negative impacts of being excluded and isolated. Volk et al. (2012) found evidence for the functionality of bullying which lends support to this suggestion.

A further key contribution of this study to the field of bullying research was the emergence of TPs and the importance of building a safe conversational environment for students like John to identify and reflect on TPs throughout their lived experiences. What is important here, is that singularly, one TP may not necessarily have altered John's behavioral trajectory, however, a cluster of TPs led to a chain reaction which appeared to have *reinforced* his bullying behavior, setting him on a path of persistent bullying.

John persistently bullied others to meet his social goals of being accepted and gaining status (Burns et al., 2008) and arguably, having power over others. Yet, had one of these TPs been disrupted, potentially the chain reaction and cumulative effect may have become disrupted, thereby altering his PB pathway/trajectory. The authors thereby challenge the readers: educators, teachers, counsellors and wellbeing leaders, to reflect on those individuals who are persistently bullying: and to support them in reflecting on what their TPs might be, and collectively share responsibility in shaping communities and environments that provide support and care in changing the course of this bullying trajectory (Stake, 1995).

Disclosure statement

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