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To cite this article: Susan M. Swearer, Cixin Wang, Brandi Berry & Zachary R. Myers (2014) Reducing Bullying: Application of Social Cognitive Theory, Theory Into Practice, 53:4, 271-277, DOI: [10.1080/00405841.2014.947221](https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947221)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2014.947221>



Accepted author version posted online: 25 Aug 2014.
Published online: 25 Aug 2014.



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Reducing Bullying: Application of Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory (SCT) is an important heuristic for understanding the complexity of bullying behaviors and the social nature of involvement in bullying. Bullying has been heralded as a social relationship problem, and the interplay between the individual and his or her social environment supports this conceptualization. SCT has been used to help guide the development of an individualized intervention for bully perpetrators, which will be described in this article. Intervening directly with those who bully others helps understand individual variation in

bullying, as well as teaches bully perpetrators alternative, prosocial ways of interacting with others. Students who bully others exhibit a complex array of psychological, cognitive, and social characteristics. In this article, we argue that to truly reduce bullying, interventions must address these psychological, cognitive, and social contributing factors. Only when interventions target these constructs will individuals be able to transform their bullying behaviors into prosocial interactions.

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Prevalence of Bullying Involvement

OVER THE PAST 2 decades, attention to bullying has exponentially increased among educational, psychological, and legal scholars and practitioners, as well as among youth and adults worldwide. With the recent events between players on the Miami Dolphins football team and allegations of bullying, harassment, and intimidation, bullying has become a major topic in the news and now in locker rooms across the country. However, despite this increased attention to the

bullying phenomenon, bullying does not appear to be significantly declining.

Studies have found that 10% to 33% of students report being victimized (Kessel Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Perkins, Craig, & Perkins, 2011); 1% to 11.5% report both bullying others and being bullied (i.e., *bully-victims*; Dulmus, Sowers, & Theriot, 2006; Nansel et al., 2001); and 5% to 13% report bullying others (Perkins et al., 2011; Seals & Young, 2003; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Although lower rates of self-reported bullying behaviors could stem from reluctance to self-report negative behavior, the disparity between the number of individuals bullying versus being bullied is consistent with research on various delinquent and criminal activities, which finds that a small number of individuals perpetrate the majority of crimes (Hamparian, Schuster, Dinitz, & Conrad, 1978). Bullying is a significant problem that needs to be reduced, and one way to do this is by intervening directly with the bully perpetrators with the goal to help these individuals change their cognitive and social behaviors that underlie their bullying perpetration.

Influence of Social Cognitive Theory on Bullying Intervention

Bandura's (1977, 1986) social cognitive theory is an updated and expanded version of social learning theory, developed by Miller and Dollard (1941). Social learning theory proposed that individuals learn not only through direct instruction but also by observing others' behaviors and the consequences that follow (Bandura, 1977). For learning to occur, individuals must (a) attend to the observed behavior, (b) encode images of the observed behavior, (c) reproduce those images, and (d) be motivated to perform the behavior. The motivational component is tied to the consequences that follow certain behaviors; specifically, individuals are more likely to engage in a behavior they have learned that the consequences are valued and rewarding (i.e., reinforced). Likewise, if the consequences of a particular behavior are more punishing and

less reinforcing, individuals will be motivated to refrain from engaging in that behavior.

Social cognitive theory hinges on the same basic principles as social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). However, social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of cognitions in determining individuals' behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Specifically, social cognitive theory proposes that there is a continuous interaction between the social environment (e.g., witnessing others' behaviors), internal stimuli (e.g., cognitions and feelings), and behaviors. This triadic interaction (i.e., social environment, internal stimuli, and behaviors) is referred to as reciprocal determinism (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Orpinas & Horne, 2006). Thus, this triadic reciprocal determinism occurs when individuals make cognitive evaluations of the behaviors of individuals in their social environments and the consequences that follow those behaviors (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Social cognitive theory has been used to explain aggressive behaviors (Bandura, 1978; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961) and can be applied to the study of bullying by explaining how individuals learn to bully (i.e., via observational learning and reinforcement). Cognitions regarding support for bullying and beliefs regarding the likelihood of positive versus negative consequences affect the likelihood that youths will bully others. Many studies demonstrate a link between observing bullying and other aggressive behaviors and perpetration of bullying behaviors among youth. For example, youth who are exposed to domestic violence in their homes are significantly more likely to bully others than those who are not exposed to domestic violence (Baldry, 2003; Bowes et al., 2009). Children and adolescents who socialize with aggressive peers are more likely to perpetrate acts of aggression than youths who do not associate with aggressive peers (Mouttapa, Valente, Gallaher, Rohrbach, & Unger, 2004). Evidence suggests that youth who live in neighborhoods judged to be less safe (i.e., characterized by more violent behaviors) are more likely than those who live in safer neighborhoods to engage in bullying behaviors (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Youngblade et al., 2007). Although there are many

possible explanations for the correlation between exposure to bullying and other aggressive behaviors and perpetration of bullying behaviors, social cognitive theory asserts that this link happens as a result of observational learning. Consistent with this assertion, some research has found that observational factors are the most strongly related to bullying behaviors (Curtner-Smith, 2000).

Youth have numerous opportunities to learn to bully via observational learning. However, not all youths who are exposed to bullying and aggression will emulate those behaviors. This is where the critical roles of cognition and reinforcement come into play. In terms of cognitions, evidence suggests that youth are less likely to engage in bullying behaviors if they think these behaviors are unacceptable. Research suggests that cognitions surrounding bullying are generally combined with emotions supportive of bullying, and tendencies to engage in bullying reflect this bidirectional relationship. Studies suggest that students holding antibullying attitudes are significantly less likely than those holding probullying attitudes to perpetrate bullying behaviors (Boulton, Trueman, & Flemington, 2002; Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Thus, research consistently demonstrates that attitudes toward bullying explain (Boulton et al., 2002) and predict (Poteat et al., 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004) bullying behaviors. Therefore, although many children and adolescents may learn to bully via observational learning, only those who hold probullying attitudes will be likely to actually engage in bullying behaviors. However, it is important to note that attitudes contain cognitive, affective, and behavioral components and reflect a mental state of readiness that influences the likelihood that one will engage in a given behavior in the future (Allport, 1935; Fazio & Olson, 2007). Therefore, probullying attitudes do not always lead to bullying behaviors. Additionally psychological and cognitive factors may affect the likelihood that youth will engage in bullying behaviors, one of which is the perception of positive versus negative consequences.

According to social cognitive theory, children and adolescents tend to avoid behaviors that they

believe will be punished and, instead, engage in behaviors that they believe will be rewarded (Bandura, 1977). Thus, according to theory, youth who perpetrate bullying believe that they will be rewarded in some way (e.g., increased social status, access to resources). Further, for the bullying behaviors to be maintained and repeated over time, individuals must receive reinforcement as a result of their bullying behaviors. Consistent with social cognitive theory, family members, adults (Bandura, 1978), and peers (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Mouttapa et al., 2004; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999) may reinforce individuals' bullying behaviors (e.g., via praise or acceptance). In fact, one study found that students who bullied on the playground were reinforced by their peers for the bullying behaviors in the majority (i.e., 81%) of incidents (Craig & Pepler, 1995). Therefore, the significant individuals in youths' lives, particularly family members and peers, impact whether youths believe that bullying is acceptable or not and whether it will be rewarded or punished.

Based on the evidence, it appears as though children and adolescents who are most likely to engage in bullying are those who: (a) are exposed to bullying and other aggressive behaviors, (b) endorse probullying attitudes, and (c) interact with individuals who overtly or covertly indicate that bullying is acceptable and reinforce the bullying behaviors of these youths. Clearly, exposure to bullying, supportive attitudes toward bullying, and the expressed attitudes and behaviors of family members, peers, and other individuals are interrelated. For example, parents who condone aggressive and coercive behaviors may model those behaviors for their children (Patterson, 1982), indicate that they support bullying, and reinforce their children's bullying behaviors, all of which are likely to encourage their children to feel and think positively about bullying.

Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions for Aggression and Bullying

Cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBI) are influenced by SCT and, given that bullying has

been conceptualized as a cognitive-behavioral phenomenon (Doll et al., 2012), may be an ideal approach to reducing bullying. CBI focuses on how one's thoughts and beliefs affect behavior (DiGiuseppe, 2009). According to CBI, modifying one's dysfunctional beliefs will have a positive impact on thoughts and behavior. In terms of internal stimuli, cognitive distortions, especially those that justify aggression (Barriga, Landau, Stinson, Liau, & Gibbs, 2000; Lardén, Melin, Holst, & Långström, 2006), are associated with bullying perpetration. Furthermore, bullying attitudes (i.e., cognitions and emotions surrounding and tendencies toward bullying) are predictive of students' bullying behaviors in that students endorsing probullying attitudes are more likely to bully others compared with students who endorse antibullying attitudes (Poteat et al., 2010; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Taken together, it appears as though there is much evidence to support the application of social cognitive theory to bullying behaviors and, thus, CBI as an appropriate intervention for students who bully.

Some CBIs have been found to decrease students' bullying behaviors (McLaughlin, Laux, & Pescara-Kovach, 2006). The Coping Power Program (CPP; Lochman & Wells, 2002), a social cognitive intervention that targets children's cognitive processes and parental behaviors, was found to reduce participants' aggressive, delinquent (e.g., substance abuse), and disruptive (e.g., hyperactive) behaviors (Boxmeyer, Lochman, Powell, Yaros, & Wojnarowski, 2007; Jurecska, Hamilton, & Peterson, 2011; Lochman & Wells, 2002, 2004); the best results being associated with use of the full program (i.e., both child and parent components). Problem-Solving Skills Training (PSST) has been found to lead to a decrease in children's aggressive and delinquent behaviors (Kazdin, Bass, Siegel, & Thomas, 1989; Kazdin, Esveldt-Dawson, French, & Unis, 1987), both used alone and combined with Parent Management Training (PMT; Kazdin, Siegel, & Bass, 1992) and combined with both PMT and parent problem solving (PPS; Kazdin & Whitley, 2003). Aggression Replacement Training (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs,

1998) is a three-part multicomponent approach including *Skillstreaming*, which teaches youths appropriate behaviors, anger control training that targets emotional regulation, and moral reasoning, which has been found to show long-term effects in decreasing aggressive behaviors among youth (Barnoski, 2004). Thus, CBIs, whether used in isolation, paired with other components such as parent training, and/or utilized in the context of a formalized intervention, appears to be effective in decreasing aggressive and disruptive behaviors in youth.

The Target Bullying Intervention Program

Research on cognitive-behavioral programs designed to reduce aggression and impulsive behavior suggests that individualized, cognitive-behavioral approaches can effectively reduce aggression and impulsivity. The Target Bullying Intervention Program (T-BIP; Swearer & Givens, 2006) provides schools with a CBI designed using research on what works in bullying and aggression reduction interventions. The T-BIP is a one-on-one cognitive-behavioral intervention for bully perpetrators. Parents are also involved in the intervention by attending a follow-up meeting, during which time the T-BIP treatment report based on the data from the intervention is reviewed and specific recommendations are discussed. Each component of the T-BIP is supported by research, which offers a higher likelihood of success. For example, one study has shown that the number of students' office referrals decreased significantly after attending the T-BIP intervention, $t(60) = 2.5, p = .02$ (Swearer, Wang, Collins, Strawhun, & Fluke, 2014).

A critical component that is missing from many extant bullying interventions is a comprehensive assessment of bullying and related problems (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008; Hilton, Anngela-Cole, & Wakita, 2010; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). A unique component of the T-BIP is the cognitive-behavioral assessment phase, which helps to identify the cognitive processes and mental health factors associated with bullying. In this phase, the interven-

tionist assesses constructs related to engagement in bullying (i.e., depression, anxiety, cognitive distortions, self-concept, perceptions of school climate, bullying involvement, and treatment acceptability).

Conclusion

Consistent with the principles of social cognitive theory, in which individuals attend to, encode, and model the behaviors they observe contingent on their motivation to attend to the behavior (Bandura, 1977), studies have found that youths who witness aggressive behaviors are more likely to bully others. Youth who witness domestic abuse (Baldry, 2003; Bowes et al., 2009), live in unsafe neighborhoods (Youngblade et al., 2007), and associate with aggressive peers (Moultapa et al., 2004) are more likely to perpetrate bullying. Students' social environments may also reinforce bullying through procurement of social status (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Moultapa et al., 2004; O'Connell et al., 1999). Thus, theory and research support the notion that students have opportunities to learn bullying behaviors via observational learning and may be motivated to bully others as a result of reinforcement for these behaviors. CBIs are tailored to an individual's unique cognitions, emotions, and behaviors. Such individualization is a necessary component for effective bullying intervention given that bullying is a complex phenomenon and multiple factors are involved in the causation and maintenance of the bullying behaviors (Doll & Swearer, 2006; Sugimura & Rudolph, 2012).

Bullying prevention and intervention programs should teach students skills that promote effective problem solving strategies and prosocial behaviors. It is important to utilize school counselors, school psychologists, and other community referral systems to provide evidence-based treatment to students involved in bullying. Social cognitive theory suggests that interventions focused on cognitive and social functioning are important for breaking the cycle of bullying involvement.

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