



Addressing Onset and Desistance of Bullying Behavior: A Qualitative Examination

Ryan Randa, Ph.D.

Brittany E. Hayes, Ph.D.

Youth bullying is an ongoing public health concern that consists of aggressive, confrontational, manipulative, and often harmful verbal and physical behavior among youth. Research has suggested that about one third of students have experienced bullying victimization (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Bullying victimization has been associated with a number of serious mental and physical health consequences, including suicide (Kim & Leventhal, 2008; Holt et al., 2015). Additional consequences of bullying victimization include substance abuse, depression, low self-esteem, and poor school performance (Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Turner, Exum, Brame, & Holt, 2013).

However, these consequences are not limited to bullying victims. Bullying perpetration has been linked to later life violence and negative consequences for the offenders as well (Farrington, 1993; Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012). Youth who display early signs of bullying behaviors are at an increased risk for future delinquent and criminal involvement (Loeber & Farrington, 2000; Loeber & Schmalting, 1985). A deeper understanding of the reasons why individuals engage in bullying perpetration, and why they stop, is needed to better inform prevention and intervention efforts.

The current study utilized open-ended survey items to assess why individuals first engaged in bullying behaviors during high school and the self-reported reason why they stopped, if they did, their bullying behaviors. Specifically, we explored survey responses in which self-identified bullies reflect on their past behavior and provide their rationale for engaging in and disengaging from bullying behavior during high school. Simply put, this work allowed youth to explain in their own words their involvement in bullying perpetration during high school from beginning to end in an effort to inform bullying prevention interventions.

Bullying

Bullying behavior has been defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm” (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7). Bullying may be seen as an early sign of future delinquent and criminal behavior (Loeber, 1996). Farrington (1993) has suggested that research on bullying can inform prevention.

Scholars have applied a variety of theories to better understand why individuals first engage in bullying behavior and why they stop. A developmental life course perspective can explore critical markers, including onset (i.e., when the behavior begins), desistance (i.e., when the behavior ends), and duration (i.e., how long the behavior lasts) of

bullying behaviors. The seminal work of Caspi and Moffitt (1993; Moffitt, 1993) proposed there is more than one developmental life course trajectory that explains patterns of offending across individuals over time and included two trajectories: life course persistent and adolescent limited. Life course persistent offenders were believed to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviors throughout their lives, whereas the adolescent limited offenders had only a brief period of heightened delinquency in their lives. This framework attempts to make sense of the relatively large portion of offenders that have very brief criminal careers, usually involving minor and non-violent forms of delinquency. This perspective may be applied to bullying perpetration. For some bullies, their bullying behavior marks the onset of a criminal career while for others it is limited to adolescence, which they eventually outgrow (Farrington, 1993). What is needed is a more thorough understanding of this process, thereby allowing those who have bullied to put in their own words why they engaged in the behavior and why they stopped, if they indeed desisted.

Methods

Data were drawn from an online survey sent via mass email during April 2014 to all enrolled students at a mid-size southern university. Incentives were not provided. The survey was completed by over six hundred respondents. For the bullying segment of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to reflect on their time in high school. Respondents were first asked if they ever took part in any type of bullying behavior as an individual or as part of a group. Following this question, respondents were asked how often they participated in the different forms of bullying including relational (i.e., “name calling” and “teasing”), physical (“pushing, hitting, or tripping”), purposeful exclusion (“intentionally leaving someone out”), and online/cyber bullying (“Facebook, texts, IM”). Overall, 187 respondents (28.2% of survey takers) reported they took part in any type of bullying behavior during high school, either as an individual or as part of a group.

Respondents were then asked, “What would best describe the reason you participated in this behavior?” and were presented a text box to type out their response. Respondents were then asked, “What would best describe the reason for no longer participating in this behavior? (if you stopped, why?)” and were also provided a text box to type their response. In total, 162 respondents provided a valid response on why they first engaged in bullying behavior and 143 respondents provided a response to why they desisted.

Analyses

Responses for why the respondent participated in bullying during high school were closed-coded for the techniques of neutralization, which are discussed in detail below, using a thematic analysis based on the five techniques previously identified by Sykes and Matza (1957). Second, responses for why the respondent desisted in

the bullying behavior were closed-coded based on the tenants of developmental theory and focused on major life events and maturation. In some cases, individuals reported more than one reason why they engaged and/or desisted in the bullying behavior, resulting in total percentages that exceeded the sample size. Overall, many of the responses were short answers and routinely contained only one or two words.

In terms of inter-rater reliability, two coders each hand-coded the reason for first engaging in bullying for primary and secondary reasons based on the techniques of neutralization. Overall, coders had an agreement rate of 87.80% for the primary reason why the individual first engaged in or desisted from bullying behavior. When the agreement rate was calculated to include agreement on either the primary or secondary rationale for why the individual engaged or desisted in the bullying behavior, the overall level of agreement increased to 92.07%. On the remaining 13 statements where there was inconsistency in the coding, each statement was read and discussed until the coders reached a consensus on the classification.

Results

Justifications for onset of bullying behavior: Techniques of neutralization. Techniques of neutralization have been theorized to provide a critical mechanism for understanding the process of acquiring definitions favorable to law violation (Sutherland, 1942; Sykes & Matza, 1957), and potentially providing an onramp to delinquency, including both adolescent limited and life course persistent offenders. Techniques of neutralization allow the potential offender to break momentarily from the accepted social behavior by 'neutralizing' the deviant behavior or excusing the behavior temporarily through a justification. Five primary justifications emerge as distinct means of excusing oneself from the deviant acts, which include (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of the victim, (4) condemnation of the condemners, and (5) appeal to higher loyalties. We utilized the techniques of neutralization as a framework to understand why respondents first engaged in high school bullying behaviors.

Table 1. Patterns of Neutralization Techniques for High School Bullying Behaviors (N=162)

<i>Technique Pattern</i>	<i>N</i>
One Technique of Neutralization	
Denial of Responsibility	118
Denial of Injury	17
Denial of Victim	18
Condemnation of the Condemners	20
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	15
More than One Technique of Neutralization	
Denial of Responsibility and Denial of Injury	7
Denial of Responsibility and Denial of Victim	7
Denial of Victim and Condemnation of the Condemners	5
Denial of Responsibility and Condemnation of the Condemners	4
Denial of Injury and Denial of Victim	2
Denial of Responsibility and Appeal to Higher Loyalties	2

The most common technique of neutralization was denial of responsibility, followed by condemnation of the condemners, denial of the victim, denial of injury, and appeal to higher loyalties. Table 1 shows the frequency of use for each technique and highlights that the use of the techniques was not mutually exclusive. Only one Caucasian male respondent provided an explanation as to why he first engaged in bullying behavior that could not be classified under a technique of

neutralization. This respondent stated he engaged in the behavior to have a "position of control over the victims."

Denial of responsibility. Sykes and Matza (1957) proposed that "denial of responsibility" includes engaging in deviant behaviors that the delinquent claimed were an "accident" or "acts that were due to forces outside the individual and beyond his/her control, such as unloving parents, bad companions, or a slum neighborhood" (p. 667). In total, 118 of the 162 valid responses for why the individual first engaged in the bullying behavior (72.84%) included some form of denial of responsibility. The majority of the respondents simply reported, "peer pressure" (without any further elaboration) as the reason to why they first engaged in the bullying behavior. One Caucasian male respondent elaborated on this theme stating, "My friends were picking on somebody and I would help them bully or laugh at the person being bullied." A Caucasian female respondent stated, "I was an idiot who didn't realize what I was doing was actually bullying because for me it was actually joking around. There wasn't any negative intent behind it." Other respondents stated they were, "trying to fit in," "was annoyed/upset at the moment and lashed out," or, "it really wasn't 'bullying' per se, more like a rite of passage" to minimize why they first engaged in the bullying behavior during high school.

Denial of injury. "Denial of injury" includes minimizing or negating the harm caused by the bullying behavior. Overall, 17 of the valid responses (10.49%) included denial of injury. Many of the respondents reported they engaged in the bullying behavior, "just to be funny" or he/she "thought it was funny we had heard a rumor."

Denial of the victim. "Denial of the victim" shifts the blame to the victim, including the victim's attributes or behaviors. A little over a tenth (11.11%) of the responses denied the victim. Examples of "denial of the victim" included not wanting to hang out with that person, not liking the person, claiming, "the people were stupid and lame" and, "I found the person to be annoying and wanted them to leave me alone. It was easier to exclude them then [sic] anything else." Two respondents said it was part of the broader group dynamic, with one Caucasian male respondent stating, "In any group of friends at any given time, someone ends up the odd man out; everybody messes with that person for no apparent reason." Some respondents even simply stated they "did not like the person."

Condemnation of the condemners. "Condemnation of the condemners" attempts to justify the behavior by calling attention to other injustices, shifting the blame away from the offender. For example, being bullied shifts the attention from the individual's bullying behaviors to others and limits the negative perceptions attached to his/her own bullying behaviors. Overall, 12.35% of responses indicated that the respondent had been bullied and that he/she engaged in bullying behaviors as a response to the bullying he/she was experiencing. Open-ended responses included "bullying the bullies," "to join so that I would not be bullied," and retaliation. These responses shifted the focus from the respondent's bullying behavior to the others' bullying behaviors.

Appeal to higher loyalties. Lastly, "appeal to higher loyalties" puts the demands of a smaller group before the demands or norms of society at large. Hazing, which involves subjecting new members to humiliating, demeaning, and sometimes abusive comments and behaviors, occurs across social groups (e.g., sports teams, military units, fraternities and sororities). In total, 15 of the 162 responses referenced this technique of neutralization. Many of the respondents qualified the statement, noting the hazing was tied to sports teams. Of the two respondents who did not report it was sports' hazing, they claimed it was related to band or "group initiation." One Caucasian male respondent reported he/she engaged in bullying because the bullying victim was dating his/her little sister.

More than one technique of neutralization reported for onset of bullying behavior. While the majority of respondents only reported

one technique of neutralization in their open-ended response, 16.67% of respondents offered more than one technique as to why they engaged in the bullying behavior during high school. The most common pairings were denial of responsibility and denial of the victim (N=7) and denial of responsibility and denial of injury (N=7). In the former, respondents stated it was both “peer pressure, didn’t like the person.” In the latter, the respondents stated, “peer pressure, didn’t intend to be mean (poking fun at friends)” or that it was just “kids being kids.” “Kids just being kids” highlights both the effects of peer pressure (i.e., denial of responsibility) as well as denial of the injury.

Desistance from Bullying Behavior

In total, 143 respondents provided a valid reason for why they desisted from the bullying behavior. Two overarching themes were identified and included: (1) maturity and (2) turning points. In addition, a small minority of students reported both a turning point and that they matured.

Maturity. The majority of respondents (N=111) indicated they desisted because they matured and/or realized the harmful effect of their behavior. Many respondents simply wrote, “I grew up” or “matured.” Some respondents added more detail stating, “Decided it was wrong even if I had to go against the majority of the group” or, “I didn’t want to be perceived as a bully.” Other respondents said they realized there was something negative about the behavior and identified those reasons (e.g., it was wrong, it hurt people’s feelings, that it was pointless).

Turning point. Alternatively, 36 respondents identified a turning point, or an event, that led to their desistance. These events, which were not mutually exclusive, included graduating (N=11), no longer hanging out with the same “crowd” (N=11), initiation ending (N=2), or no longer being bullied (N=1). Interestingly, only one female respondent said the bullying behavior ended because someone got involved when “she brought the issue to the teacher.”

Both maturity and a turning point. Four respondents provided both a turning point and said they matured. One female respondent said “graduated, grew up” while another had a very different experience. This latter female respondent said, “I stopped when one of the individuals slapped me in the face. That was when I first realized that I had hurt his feelings, and I never did it again.” A male respondent said that he “grew up” and began working with at-risk youth. It is clear from these examples that turning points can be varied and that respondents may identify both a turning point and the process of maturation. Lastly, it is interesting to note that two of the respondents indicated they still engage in the bullying behavior.

Discussion

Whether considering bullying perpetration as a pathway to delinquency, a limited youthful aggressive behavior, or means to establish social hierarchy, there is a need to better understand the entire course of it. There are a growing number of perspectives on the “life course” of delinquent behavior, which address an individual path both into and out of delinquency. Here, survey respondents were presented with an open-ended question regarding why they began and why they desisted bullying. Given this opportunity, former bullies were more apt to excuse their behavior than explain it. As it relates to onset, respondent commentary resembled techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957). From this perspective, the bully does not condone the behavior and must neutralize his/her feelings of right and wrong or disengage from his/her perspective on morality in order to participate.

Often, respondents indicated they did not believe the victim was hurt, and if the victim was hurt, the injury was not that serious. Many respondents reported they found the behavior funny or that it was

part of a joke. By defining the behavior and the outcome as a joke, the potential negative effects of the behavior are discounted. A small percent of respondents reported they engaged in the behavior because of the demands of a smaller group.

One perspective with potential to explain the limited entrée into aggressive behavior suggests that multiple life course trajectories are explained in part by gaps between physiological development and social status (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991, 1993; Moffitt, 1993). Individuals who are classified as adolescent limited offenders may behave poorly because of their experienced gap in social and physical maturity. As such, these adolescent limited offenders appear to age out of crime as their social and physical maturity reach a balance. Many of the individuals in this sample of university students explained their exit from bullying behavior as “growing up.” And, perhaps this suggests that among those capable of moving on to university, bullying was an adolescent limited expression. Early definitions of bullying proposed that it might be a means of elevating one’s position in the social hierarchy. It could be reasonable that our sample employed bullying others as an unfavorable means to a desired end. Our sample uniquely provides insight into a group of individuals who engaged in adolescent limited bullying.

Explanations for desistance in our sample ranged from aging out or maturing, to encountering “turning points,” such as graduating and moving on to college. A large number of respondents discussed events in their life that aided in their transition away from bullying perpetration, such as graduating high school. Collectively it would seem that for those college students who reported having bullied in the past that it was a brief expression of behavior justified using one of the techniques of neutralization and in most cases desistance was attributed to their own relative maturity.

Future Research and Policy Implications

The overwhelming majority of bullying research conducted globally focuses on school age children (5-15 years of age), and in many cases the goal of that research is evaluating school based programs aimed at prevention (e.g. Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Limber, 2004; Olweus & Limber, 2010). School researchers often focus on the creation, implementation, and evaluation of bullying prevention and harm reduction programs (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Limber, 2004; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). In this sample the majority of respondents identified maturing as their reason for desisting from bullying rather than some form of intervention or programming. In the case that our findings accurately depict the process of how students neutralize the behavior before engaging, then anti-bullying programs which focus on promoting awareness may be more effective. However, we do not know if these students were exposed to anti-bullying programming or other educational efforts that would have fostered empathy and growth that they might attribute to maturation over time.

Effective September 1, 2017, “David’s Law” in Texas was passed to address cyberbullying that occurs off-campus. This act amended the Education Code in an effort to encourage mental health programs in public schools. The Texas School Safety Center (2018) offers events, tools, and videos for school administrators. Campus Eye (2018) is a mobile application that was developed to help students, parents, and school administrators report, track, and resolve bullying incidents as they arise. As these programs continue to develop, it is important they are evaluated with evidence-based practices grounded in research. Based on the findings from the current work, practices and programming that facilitates ‘growing up’ would seem to be most likely to increase desistance from bullying behavior.

References

- Campus Eye. (2018). *Campus Eye*. Retrieved from <https://getcampuseye.com/>.
- Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T.E. (1991). Individual differences are accentuated

- during periods of social change: the sample case of girls at puberty. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(1), 157-168.
- Caspi, A., & Moffitt, T.E. (1993). When do individual differences matter? A paradoxical theory of personality coherence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 4(4), 247-271.
- Espelage, D.L., & Swearer, S.M. (2003). Research on school bullying and victimization: What have we learned and where do we go from here?. *School Psychology Review*, 32(3), 365-384.
- Farrington, D.P. (1993). Understanding and preventing bullying. In M. Tonry (Ed.), *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 17, 381-458. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Farrington, D.P., & Ttofi, M.M. (2009). Reducing school bullying: Evidence-based implications for policy. *Crime and Justice*, 38(1), 281-345.
- Gómez-Guadix, M., Orue, I., Smith, P.K., & Calvete, E. (2013). Longitudinal and reciprocal relations of cyberbullying with depression, substance use, and problematic internet use among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(4), 446-452.
- Gladden, R.M., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Hamburger, M.E., & Lumpkin, C.D. (2014). *Bullying surveillance among youths: Uniform definitions for public health and recommended data elements*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and U.S. Department of Education.
- Holt, M.K., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Polanin, J.R., Holland, K.M., DeGue, S., Matjasko, J.L., & Reid, G. (2015). Bullying and suicidal ideation and behaviors: A meta-analysis. *Pediatrics*, 135(2), 1-14.
- Kim, Y.S., & Leventhal, B. (2008). Bullying and suicide: A review. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 20(2), 133-154.
- Kowalski, R.M., & Limber, S.P. (2013). Psychological, physical, and academic correlates of cyberbullying and traditional bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(1), S13-S20.
- Limber, S.P. (2004). "Implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in American schools." In D.L. Espelage & S.M. Swearer (Eds.), *Bullying in American schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention* (351-363). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Loeber, R. (1996). "Developmental continuity, change, and pathways in male juvenile problem behaviors". In J. D. Hawkins (Ed.), *Delinquency and crime: Current theories* (1-27). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Loeber, R., & Schmalin, K.B. (1985). Empirical evidence for overt and covert patterns of antisocial conduct problems: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 13(2), 337-353.
- Loeber, R., & Farrington, D.P. (2000). Young children who commit crime: Epidemiology, developmental origins, risk factors, early interventions, and policy implications. *Development and Psychopathology*, 12(4), 737-762.
- Modecki, K.L., Minchin, J., Harbaugh, A.G., Guerra, N.G., & Runions, K.C. (2014). Bullying prevalence across contexts: A meta-analysis measuring cyber and traditional bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55(5), 602-611.
- Moffitt, T.E. (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100(4), 674-701.
- Olweus, D., & Limber, S.P. (2010). Bullying in school: Evaluation and dissemination of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 80(1), 124-134.
- Smith, P.K., Pepler, D., & Rigby, K. (2004). *Bullying in schools: How successful can interventions be?*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Smokowski, P.R., & Kopasz, K.H. (2005). Bullying in school: An overview of types, effects, family characteristics, and intervention strategies. *Children & Schools*, 27(2), 101-110.
- Sutherland, E.H. (1942). Development of the theory. In K. Schuessler (Ed.), *Edwin Sutherland on analyzing crime* (30-41). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sykes, G.M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review*, 22(6), 664-670.
- Texas School Safety Center (2018). *Tools*. Retrieved from: <https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/>.
- Ttofi, M.M., Farrington, D.P., & Lösel, F. (2012). School bullying as a predictor of violence later in life: A systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective longitudinal studies. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 17(5), 405-418.
- Turner, M.G., Exum, M.L., Brame, R., & Holt, T.J. (2013). Bullying victimization and adolescent mental health: General and typological effects across sex. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 41(1), 53-59.

Crime Victims' Institute Advisory Board

Blanca Burciaga, Ft. Worth
Director, Victim Assistance Unit

Victoria Camp, Austin
Consultant

Dottie Carmichael, College Station
Texas A&M PPRI

Stefani Carter, Austin

Robert Duncan, Austin
TTU System Chancellor

Ana Elizabeth Estevez, Amarillo
District Judge

Ann Matthews, Jourdanon
Domestic Violence

Rodman Goode, Cedar Hill
Law Enforcement Teacher

Geoffrey Puryear, Georgetown
District Attorney

Richard L. Reynolds, Austin
Psychotherapist

Stephanie Anne Schulte, El Paso
ICU Nurse

Jane Shafer, San Antonio
San Antonio PD Victim Liaison

Debbie Unruh, Austin
Ombudsman

Ms. Mary Anne Wiley, Austin
Office of the Governor

Mark Wilson, Hillsboro
Hill County Sheriff's Office

Texas State University System Board of Regents

William F. Scott, Chairman
Nederland

David Montagne, Vice Chairman
Beaumont

Charlie Amato
San Antonio

Dr. Veronica Muzquiz Edwards
San Antonio

Duke Austin
Houston

Nicki Harle
Baird

Don Flores
El Paso

Alan L. Tinsley
Madisonville

Garry Crain
The Hills

Katey McCall
Student Regent, Orange

Brian McCall
Chancellor

We're on the web

www.crimevictimsinstitute.org