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Woodpushers Are Gay': The Role of Provocation in Bullying

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'Woodpushers are Gay': The Role of Provocation in Bullying

Keywords: bullying; primary school students; semi-structured interviews; provocation; cognitive dissonance; justification of situation; social desirability

Introduction

Australian studies have found that about six per cent of Grade 6 students regularly (daily, weekly or every few weeks) bully others (Burns *et al*, 2008) and about a sixth of school students are bullied regularly (at least once a week) (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee 1999). The proportion of students who

bully others (and are bullied) occasionally is considerably larger (Rigby, 1997; Burns *et al*, 2008). While there is a plethora of literature describing the factors that may influence bullying behaviours among children and adolescents, most of these data have been collected via quantitative studies. This paper describes findings from a qualitative study that investigated factors that influence the initiation, persistence and desistance of bullying among students of upper primary school age. This paper addresses the specific research question: 'What is the influence of perceived provocation on the initiation and persistence of bullying?'

A B S T R A C T

This mixed-methods study found that upper primary school students who report that they bully others use the perception that they are provoked in some way to justify their bullying behaviour. While some students provided examples of subversive provocation in which the person being bullied was 'annoying', others used their own victimisation as a means to justify their bullying behaviour. Use of perceived provocation enabled students to shift the blame to the student being bullied and consequently to

ease their feelings of dissonance over a potentially socially undesirable behaviour. The labelling of some students provided further justification of their behaviour for those who bullied others. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of Grade 7 students aged approximately 12 years (N = 51) who reported on a self-report questionnaire that they had bullied others, either regularly or occasionally, as part of a three-year randomised control trial bullying prevention intervention project.

Bullying is a complex issue and by definition is a repeated event. A socio-ecological framework that recognises the complex relationships between the individual, family, peer group, school, community, environment and culture is useful when investigating why some students bully others. Bullying behaviours are dynamic, and student involvement falls along a continuum. Differences in the individual and behavioural characteristics of students who bully may be attributed to different types of bullying behaviour and whether students are categorised as ‘bullies’ or ‘bully-victims’ (bully/bullied) (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

The association between aggression and bullying is widely acknowledged (Olweus, 1992; Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Veenstra *et al*, 2005). A distinctive characteristic of a typical student who bullies others is their persistent and deliberate aggression towards peers (Olweus, 1993). The terms proactive and reactive aggression are commonly used to differentiate between aggressive behaviours. Proactive (or instrumental) aggression is behaviour that is directed at the student being bullied to achieve a desired outcome, which may include power, affiliation or gaining property (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). Reactive aggression targets the student being bullied as the result of an aversive event that elicits anger or frustration for the person doing the bullying. Typically this is seen as some type of provocation (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Pellegrini & Long, 2004).

While peer bullying is acknowledged to be a reliably identifiable sub-type of a student’s aggressive behaviour (Slee, 1995), the widely recognised definition of bullying implies that, in being deliberate, systematic and repeatedly targeted at the same individual or individuals, the behaviour is more proactive than reactive (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002). However, some studies have found that students who bully perceive some behaviours to be provocative (Karatzias *et al*, 2002). In addition, children have been found to view bullying behaviour in broader terms (Eslea & Rees, 2001; Kanetsuna *et al*, 2006) without necessarily acknowledging ‘intention’, ‘repetition of actions’ or ‘power imbalance between aggressors and victims’ (Kanetsuna *et al*, 2006).

Method

Sample

This study was part of a larger mixed-methods study (Bryman, 2004). The sample was generated from the Grade 6/7 (10–12 years) cohort of the Friendly Schools, Friendly Families (FSFF) Project. The FSFF Project was a group-

randomised control trial that studied the effect of a three-year whole school bullying prevention intervention by collecting data from students, teachers and parents. The FSFF Project has been described in more detail elsewhere (Burns *et al*, 2008a).

Using an item from the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996) baseline data was collected from Grade 6 (*N* = 1257) students from 20 Western Australian government primary schools in the Perth metropolitan area. A full description is provided elsewhere (Burns *et al*, 2008a).

A purposive random sample of students who bully others regularly and occasionally were recruited from the Grade 6/7 cohort (*N* = 46). To reduce the likelihood of stigmatisation of students who bully, additional students who reported no involvement in bullying behaviour at baseline were also randomly selected and invited to participate (*N* = 5). While the small size of this sample precludes any direct comparison with this group, these additional students provide valuable insights into bullying and hence have been included in this analysis. Of those students interviewed, 31 (60.8%) were boys and 20 (39.2%) girls. The higher proportion of boys is consistent with the Grade 6/7 cohort at baseline (Table 1, below). Bivariate analysis was conducted to ensure the sample was representative of the Grade 6/7 cohort who reported to bully others. No statistically significant differences (*p* > 0.001) were found between the characteristics, attitudes or behaviours of students in the Grade 6/7 study cohort who self-reported bullying others and the students involved in this qualitative study. Qualitative data were collected at the end of the Grade 7 school year when most students were 12 years of age.

Active consent was obtained from students, parents and the school principal for all students participating in the

TABLE 1 Differences between Level of Bullying for the whole Study Cohort and Students Involved in the Qualitative Study at Baseline

	Students interviewed		Whole Grade 6 cohort at baseline	
	n	%	n	%
Boy				
Regular	8	25.0	57	8.9
Occasional	21	65.6	196	30.7
Not at all	3	9.4	386	60.4
Total	32		639	
Girl				
Regular	3	15	19	3.1
Occasional	14	70	161	26.5
Not at all	3	15	427	70.3
Total	20		607	

research. Each school posted consent forms directly to parents/caregivers of the students who were selected to participate. Of the 193 consent forms posted, 69 (35.7%) parents/caregivers responded. Of these, 52 (26.7%) provided positive consent. One student could not be interviewed due to repeated absences. The research protocol, interview guide and consent procedures were approved by the Curtin University of Technology Human Research and Ethics Committee.

Procedure

The baseline quantitative data and a review of the literature were used to inform the content and structure of the qualitative interview guide. Questions for the interviews were developed by the authors and were reviewed for validity by an expert panel representing the education, health promotion, psychology and sociology fields. This interview guide was tested with two 12-year-old students prior to administration. Consistent with theory development and purposeful sampling, the interview questions were modified as more targeted data were required (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Minichiello *et al*, 1995). This included exploring issues in more detail as they emerged during the interview. Combining interpretive and functionalist perspectives, data were investigated using the analytical framework and methodological process of symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2001) and cognitive dissonance theories (Festinger, 1957).

Method of data collection and management

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the subsample of Grade 7 students who reported that they bullied others. Consistent with good qualitative research practice, all interviews were conducted by the same person, who was an experienced school teacher with expertise in education and health promotion (Windsor *et al*, 1994).

Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed from the audio recording, consistent with recommendations for interviewing children (Wilson & Powell, 2001). The 40-minute interviews were conducted face-to-face on the school premises, at a time that was convenient to the school staff and students.

The interview commenced by asking students questions pertaining to their sense of self (Mead, 1934). Students were then presented with a short vignette (Burns *et al*, 2008b) to introduce the issue of bullying in the third person before being asked about bullying behaviours, first in the third person and then about their own bullying behaviours. In addition to enabling comparison of data collected in the

third and the first person, this strategy also provided students with an opportunity to discuss bullying behaviours that were common at their school. To establish whether students had a good understanding of bullying, they were asked during the early part of the interview to provide a definition. All students provided a sound description based on the definition developed by Olweus, which includes reference to power imbalance and different types of physical, verbal and relational bullying (Olweus, 1996; Solberg & Olweus, 2003).

Data were coded and placed in categories that emerged from the data and those derived from the literature. Data management of full transcripts and other relevant text was facilitated by the NUD.IST software package QSR N5 (QSR International, 2000). To ensure anonymity when presenting the data, all students were allocated a pseudonym.

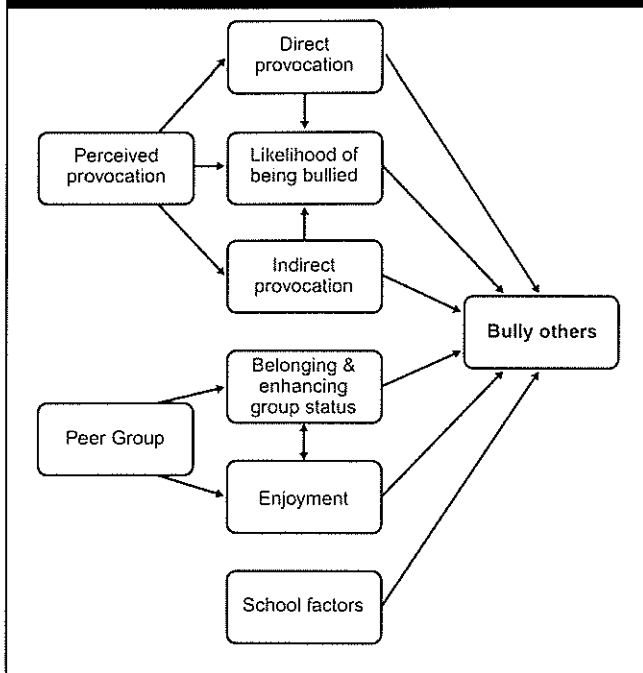
Data in this paper are presented with the student 'name' followed by their gender, the level of intervention and the level of self-reported bullying experiences in parenthesis. The levels of self-reported bullying and being bullied were collected from the quantitative data at baseline, post-test 1 and post-test 2. These additional data show changes in self-reported bullying behaviour during the two years of the intervention. For example, if a student reported bullying regularly at baseline, occasionally at post-test 1 and not at all at post-test 2, these data are presented as (regular – occasional – no bully). If the student reported no changes or changes at only one collection point, data are presented as (regular bully) or (regular – occasional bully) respectively. Therefore all quotations are accompanied by a short student profile, for example: (Emily, female, moderate intervention, occasional – regular – occasional bully, occasional – not bullied).

Results

Similar themes emerged for the initiation and persistence of bullying when students discussed these issues in both third and first person. It is evident that bullying is a complex behaviour, and that a range of inter-relationships and interactions contribute to the initiation and maintenance of this behaviour. This study found that key factors that influence initiation and persistence of bullying behaviour included peer group (Burns *et al*, 2008a), perceived provocation and school factors (*Figure 1*, overleaf). This paper will explore the influence of perceived provocation in the initiation and persistence of bullying behaviour.

All the students in this study used perceived provocation as justification of bullying, by others and/or themselves. Discussion about 'perceived provocation' was consistent for both third and first person. Two sub-themes emerged, direct and indirect perceived provocation. Indirect perceived

FIGURE 1 Factors Influencing the Initiation and Persistence of Bullying



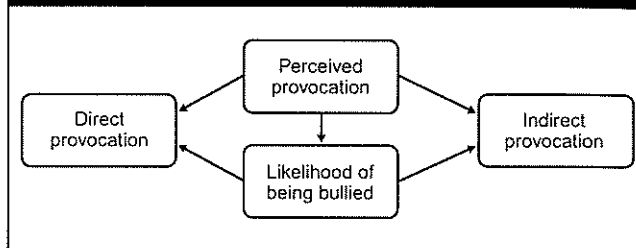
provocation included provocation by annoying or ‘different’ students whom the person bullying perceived as provocative. Direct perceived provocation referred to reactive behaviour, which was usually described by a student who had also been bullied. All the students in the study suggested that some ‘types’ of student were more likely to get bullied than others (likelihood of being bullied) (Figure 2, below).

Initiation and persistence of bullying in the third person

When presented with the vignette about a child being bullied, all the students in this study (N = 51) suggested that the person being bullied must have done ‘something’ to get bullied. Discussion reflected examples of both direct and indirect perceived provocation. All students agreed that the behaviour described in the vignette was bullying. Most commonly students implied that the person being bullied in the vignette must have said something or done something nasty to the person doing the bullying or to his/her friends. The students did not consider it unusual that friends were involved in bullying behaviours. Justin and Emily’s responses were typical of the responses to the question: ‘What might make Sam want to hurt Tony like this?’.

‘Um I’m not sure, depending on what was going on probably, um, Tony may have done something to him just beforehand. Or maybe Sam had just been influ-

FIGURE 2 Perceived Provocation as an Influence on Initiating and Persisting Bullying



enced by his peers or he’s seen something on TV or maybe they’d had a fight or something before or um maybe other things were happening with other students and he just wanted to be away from them for a while.’ (Justin, male, moderate intervention, regular – occasional – no bully, occasional bullied)

‘Umm maybe Holly said something behind her back knowing that Susie doesn’t like something and done that thing that she doesn’t like...’ (Emily, female, moderate intervention, occasional – regular – occasional bully, occasional bullied)

Justin’s discussion demonstrates the complexity of bullying behaviours and the range of influences. His comment reflects both direct and indirect perceived provocation, suggesting that the two themes are not always mutually exclusive. He did, however, demonstrate feelings of dissonance, and suggested that the behaviour might be reactive and not planned. This was typical of Justin’s personal experiences, as he discussed episodes of reactive aggression, which he later regretted.

‘Just because he was in the moment and he didn’t know what he was doing, he figured this is the best thing to do right now and this was um he didn’t even think about it that he might regret it later.’ (Justin, male, moderate intervention, regular – occasional – no bully, occasional bullied)

Both Justin and Emily suggest that the student bullied because he/she had been provoked by something the person being bullied had done. Although these responses are more typical of reactive bullying, the behaviour described by students in this study did not always immediately precede the provocation, suggesting that the behaviour was planned. Justin’s comments that the student bullying ‘just wanted to be away from them for a while’ also implies that he or she may have wanted to gain control over the situation or avoid the situation.

Some students in this study felt that being different or

being annoying was enough to incite an aggressive act, and this indirect provocation was used by students to justify their behaviour. This is reflected in Alex's statement when he was asked to discuss the person being bullied in the vignette: *'might just be really annoying and like...'*. In addition, if bullying is seen as socially undesirable (Furnham, 1986) students may use perceived provocation as a means to justify their behaviour. This finding warrants further investigation to explore the extent of the use of blaming others to justify bullying behaviours.

Initiation and persistence of bullying in the first person

When questions about bullying were asked in the first person, all the students who admitted to bullying another student in some way implied that the person they bullied had provoked them. This was true whether students described proactive or reactive bullying behaviours. Again provocation was subjective; for some it meant they had been bullied first (reactive bullying, direct perceived provocation), while for others it was because the student had done 'something' to annoy them (more likely to be involved in proactive bullying, indirect perceived provocation). However, all used perceived provocation to justify their behaviour.

Indirect perceived provocation

Most students who had not been bullied by others implied that the student or students they bullied had deserved to be bullied, thereby justifying their own behaviour. These students were considered to be provocative by being annoying, 'different' or smart, saying annoying things or not saying anything (that is, being too quiet and 'geeky'). Identification of provocative actions was central to the definition of the situation students constructed. Students were able to achieve feelings of consonance (Festinger, 1957) about their behaviours by placing blame for the action on those who were bullied. The comments of Alex, Adam, Hayden and William reflect some of the different types of 'provocation' discussed by most students who reported proactive bullying.

'... for instance there's a guy in our class who's a real idiot he does the stupidest things and like without thinking about them and yeah gets bullied quite a lot' (Alex, male, low intervention, regular bully, regular – no bullied)

'There's not much bullying that isn't called for here,

so usually kids they ask for it.' (Adam, male, high intervention, regular – no bully, occasional – no bullied)

'Sometimes I get really peeved off with people because like if they don't listen or anything.' (Hayden, male, low intervention, occasional – no bully, regular bullied)

'... kids who are annoying' (William, male, low intervention, occasional – regular – occasional bully, regular – occasional bullied)

When Alex described what would make someone 'annoying', it appeared that a child could be annoying simply because he/she said silly things in class. When asked what kids who were annoying were like, William responded:

'I dunno, they like school work and stuff'.

This was a common theme for a group of students in this study. These students suggested that being a 'nerd' or 'teacher's pet' provided justification for being bullied. Alex justifies his behaviour by suggesting that some students 'deserve' to be bullied because they are annoying or do 'stupid' things.

'Oh cos like I'm quite tall, I'm not being up myself but like quite tall and solid like... the guy who deserved to be bullied is like a little guy does really stupid things or is really getting on my nerves and trying to get to fight with me, I dunno why and after school I just like yeah... I bashed him... I didn't make him cry cos like I don't beat people up until like until they hurt, however I just make them learn their lesson like but yeah I just walked off.' (Alex, male, low intervention, regular bully, regular – no bullied)

By framing his bullying with the words *'I just make them learn their lesson'*, Alex attempts to legitimise his bullying by taking an authority position, that of a teacher. This is an example of a secondary justification following from provocation.

Direct perceived provocation

More than half of the students in this study (61%) indicated that they had also been bullied and that is why they bullied others. For some this meant responding directly to the students doing the bullying by teasing, calling names or hitting

back, and for others it resulted in their seeking out other students to bully. Most of these students expressed feelings of remorse, anger, sadness and a need to retaliate. Most showed feelings of cognitive dissonance, but for some of these students feelings of dissonance may have moved to consonance as they justified their behaviour.

As bullying is widely considered a socially undesirable behaviour, many students in this study began talking about bullying in the third person. As consistent with Adam's comments, the discussion usually progressed to reflect their own behaviour. For example, when asked what sort of things kids do 'to ask for it' Adam responded with:

'oh they swear at them and say bad things about them... so it's not hurting them they just don't like it... if they're saying it's serious they don't like it. I was skateboarding here at school and I skateboard past this little kid called Joe... I didn't even do anything and he said 'woodpushers' are gay, which means skateboarders are gay... I felt like going up and sortin' him out but I couldn't cos yeah I just didn't wanna get in trouble... and yeah he asks for it – no one likes him at this school' (Adam, male, high intervention, regular – no bully, occasional – no bullied).

Adam went on to describe situations where he had been both physically and verbally aggressive to other students, but justified the situation by implying that he would never initiate the behaviour.

'Oh it depends if they do something first, see. I wouldn't do it, I wouldn't start anything first 'cos I don't say I'm better than anyone.' (Adam, male, high intervention, regular – no bully, occasional – no bullied)

Some of the provocation described involved constant name-calling and generally annoying behaviour. Mark, a confident and seemingly popular child who was a school prefect, described this type of provocation.

'They just get in my face, I like my personal space and they call me things I've told them not to call me and say stuff that hurts me inside and just makes me feel bad..., there's this one boy and he's just called me names and I've told him not to call me this name and he's done it so many times and I just can't, I'm just sick of it'... and I'm gonna flip if he does it again.' (Mark, male, high intervention, occasional bully, no – occasional bullied)

Mark's comments reflected a need to retaliate if the perceived provocation reaches a threshold level, so identification of a threshold level provided justification for his behaviour. He also displayed feelings of dissonance, but he felt that his behaviour was justified because the other child had always provoked him before he retaliated. In doing this Mark was able to move his feelings of dissonance to that of consonance. He also suggested that in some cases when kids were continually annoying him by saying something nasty, he would 'get physical with them'.

Mark reinforced these feelings later in the interview when asked why he had bullied others. His comments reflect a need to 'get even' and provide a justification for his behaviour.

'... and umm yeah and it's not really nice what I say, it just makes me angry... I don't deserve to be called what I get called so I'm gonna say it back to them so I think in my mind it makes us even.' (Mark, male, high intervention, occasional bully, no – occasional bullied)

Some students described bullying as a means of asserting their position. Hayden (male, low intervention, occasional – no bully, regular bullied) provides an example of a student who describes reactive aggression as a means of retaliating, and in doing so asserting his power and status in the situation and school setting. His comments suggest that his actions made him feel good about what he had done.

'... and there was like this kid and he's like really stupid he's like a real retard and he like starts bullying me. I dunno why and like he's gay. I mean it he's really queer... and then he just kicks me as hard as he can and so after school he had his bike and I pushed him into a Blackboy.' ('Blackboy' was the outdated common name for the *Xanthorrhoea presissii* (Balga tree) a native tree common in the Perth region. *Xanthorrhoea*'s are also known as grass trees)

When asked how that would make him feel and whether he would do it again Hayden's response was:

'Good!... If it was him YES I would! Cos I know he's a weakling' (Hayden).

Similarly, Justin and Pete both felt they had a right to get back at a child who had bullied them.

'I wasn't feeling very good about myself although I

knew what I was doing was wrong I thought he's doing it to me I might as well just do it back to him as well.' (Justin)

'Um I don't feel very good but umm it's like I feel kind of happy at the same time that they're getting a taste of their own medicine.' (Pete)

Discussion

A number of limitations to this study should be considered when interpreting these results. While there were no statistically significant differences between levels of self-reported bullying and key mediating factors among those who participated in the study compared with those who did not, students who selected not to participate in this phase of the research may have been different in ways not tested. The study is therefore subject to selection bias at school and individual levels, and caution should be taken when generalising these results. The students involved in this study had completed 20 months of a bullying prevention intervention at varying levels of dose, and so may not be representative of other 12 year olds who report bullying others.

It is acknowledged that the baseline quantitative data were collected early in Year 6 when students were 10 to 11 years of age, while the qualitative data were collected at the end of Year 7 when most students were 12 years of age. This time difference provides an opportunity to observe any changes in behaviour, which adds to the richness of these data.

This study uses the terms reactive and proactive bullying to characterise behaviours described by the students. These measures have not been empirically verified.

This paper has reported only data addressing the key theme of perceived provocation. Given that bullying is a complex behaviour, it is not surprising that a number of individual, peer and socio-ecological themes emerged from these data (*Figure 1*). These results therefore provide a summary of only one of the key themes that influence the initiation and persistence of bullying.

The findings of this study suggest that perceived provocation is subjective, and what constitutes provocation for one person may be quite different for another, but justification of bullying because of perceived provocation was consistent. For students in this study, attributing blame to others was a means of justifying their behaviour and achieving consonance.

Like other studies, this study found that some students are more likely to be bullied than others because of social characteristics (Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003). While quantitative studies have found that most students are opposed to bullying (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Randall, 1995),

there is a group of students with a tendency strongly to dislike those who are bullied, to feel a general admiration for those who bully others (Rigby & Slee, 1991) and to attach little importance to the feelings of the student being bullied. Similar to findings in this study, peer support for the bullying student has been found to be more likely when the person being bullied is seen to 'deserve' the behaviour (Slee & Rigby, 1993), attaching 'blame' to the person being bullied. Many children behave in ways that incite rather than discourage the bully (Salmivalli *et al*, 2004). Some students in this study found being a 'geek' or a 'nerd', being 'annoying' or 'saying nothing in class' to be provocative behaviour. While some students in the study experienced dissonance over their own and others' actions, they all used the concept of perceived provocation as a justification of bullying behaviours.

Externalising the responsibility to the person being bullied, by suggesting that this person provoked them in some manner, was a way of justifying the bullying behaviour. This was central to the way students defined the situation and, when linked to the concept of 'othering', allowed students to claim that the person was different in some way (Thomas, 1972; Grove & Zwi, 2006). 'Othering' is a process that defines and secures an individual or group's own identity or sense of 'self' by distancing and stigmatising an 'other'. In doing so it aims to normalise the behaviour of an individual or group while establishing the difference of others as a point of deviance (Grove & Zwi, 2006).

The language in this study showed that students often 'othered' to help justify their action. Hayden's comments provide a good example, by implying that the child he bullied was 'different'. When discussing why some students were bullied, all students provided some social and/or physical characteristics that made specific children a target. Students in this study implied that these 'different' children provoked by their presence. Similarly, others have found children bullied other students because of the bullied students' social and/or physical characteristics (Phillips, 2003; Terasahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Akiba, 2004), or for something they may have done or said (Owens *et al*, 2000).

One of the constructs used in symbolic interaction is that of definition of the situation (Charon, 2001). A key interaction in the definition of the situation is the construction of an identity for the self and for others. This may explain the justification of the bullying described by these students. Students' accounts were responding not so much to the words or actions, but to how they defined these objects in their situation. Objects may be used to provide definition to the situation and to achieve goals in a situation, and they may be changed according to changing goals (Charon,

2001). In assessing the situation, the students in this study determined that the person being bullied in the scenario, or in their personal situation, had done something to deserve the bullying. These discussions suggest that this is likely to be a common reaction to bullying and may be a way of justifying bullying behaviour.

The act of bullying, whether it is reactive or proactive, may itself be the object which is used to provide definition to the situation and to achieve goals (Charon, 2001). The identities individuals hold for themselves and the counter identities they hold for others are central to any definition of the situation. Identification of a provocative act and the secondary justifications that students presented allow them to maintain a positive sense of self while committing an action they know to be socially undesirable. To achieve consistency between identities and situational meaning, students who bully others need to encourage those they bully to behave so as to support the identity they have developed for them (Cast, 2003). This helps explain some of the reactive bullying, which was partly justified by the need to reject the role of 'victim' they believed had been imposed on them by another.

Bullying may also reflect dissonance and, for those for whom bullying affords some perceived positive benefits, this may be changed to consonance (Festinger, 1957). Some students in this study regretted their behaviour, which creates cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and provides potential for change. For some of these students this may also reflect a change in self-identity. However, despite these feelings, many of these students reduced their dissonance by focusing on the positive outcomes bullying afforded them, usually in enhanced power and status within their peer group and the school community.

Conclusion

This study has found that perceived provocation is a very real perception among students who bully others. That all the students held the social construction that some type of provocation precedes bullying is indicative of the robust nature of this construct and the way it is promulgated by generalised others in our society. Many students demonstrated feelings of dissonance which may have encouraged them to use perceived provocation to justify their situation.

The findings from this study suggest that it may not always be clear whether behaviour is purely 'proactive' or 'reactive'. Bullying may play a protective role, in that reactive bullying may allow the child to maintain a sense of self that is positive, and a feeling of control over the situation. While this may not be an effective strategy for a

marginalised child with reduced social resources, bullying may be a way of asserting some influence in the world around them.

The need to justify bullying behaviours by perceived provocation results in labelling and shifting the blame to students being bullied, thus achieving consonance. Students need skills to address questions of perceived provocation. For some this includes acceptance of diversity and enhanced empathy, while some may need anger management skills. For others, perceived provocation results in reactive bullying situations, so a focus on communication, problem-solving and assertiveness skills may be necessary. These skills can be embedded in universal intervention programmes, with recognition that a small proportion of students may require selective or indicated strategies. School-based programmes need to adopt a whole-school approach (Wyn *et al*, 2000) with classroom strategies reinforced by appropriate management of bullying, a school ethos that does not tolerate bullying, a positive physical environment, and parent and community involvement and education.

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Note

This study uses the terms 'many', 'some' and 'few' to describe how many students reported behaviours, attitudes or feelings. Although based empirically on the approximations of counts of mentions that emerged from the coding process, these are not intended to stand up to significance testing, and no such assumptions should be inferred from the wording. This is consistent with other qualitative studies (Richters et al, 2003; Brown & Maycock, 2005).

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