Common Understandings around Bullying

Defining and Measuring Bullying

What is Bullying?

The definition used by most researchers today is:

Bullying is a repeated behaviour; that may be physical, verbal, and/or psychological; where there is intent to cause fear, distress, or harm to another; that is conducted by a more powerful individual or group; against a less powerful individual or group of individuals who are unable to stop this from happening.[29]

The key elements of a bullying incident include both a perpetrator's and target's perspective— the perpetrator has more perceived power, they repeat the behaviour and with intention, while the target feels the bullying is unprovoked or unjustifiable and they are not able to stop the behaviour from happening to them. If these elements are not present, using this definition the behaviour would be considered an aggressive act and not an incident of bullying.

When talking with young people about bullying it is more understandable to describe bullying as a series of descriptive behaviours, rather than one broad term that has many negative connotations, especially when discussing cyberbullying. The behaviours commonly used to describe bullying include being repeatedly:

- Ignored or left out on purpose
- Made fun of and/or teased in a mean and hurtful way
- Made to feel afraid of getting hurt
- Stared at with mean looks and/or gestures
- Embarrassed by nasty stories or rumours spread about you
- Forced to do things you don't want to
- Hit, kicked or pushed around

There has been much discussion about cyberbullying and how it should best be defined. Proposed definitions range from a focus on only behaviour to only technology. Following six years of assessing, evaluating and addressing cyberbullying in schools, the CHPRC defines cyberbullying as follows:

Cyberbullying is when a group or an individual use information and communication technologies (ICT) to intentionally harm a person over time, who cannot easily stop this bullying from continuing.[30]

The most important aspect of this definition is that it is not focused on ICT but stipulates that cyberbullying is bullying via ICT. That is, it is about the behaviour, not about the technology.

What is *not* bullying?

Given the complex definition of bullying, it is important to also consider what behaviours are not bullying. One example of what is not considered bullying is a fight between two equally matched students. Friendly teasing is also not considered bullying. These examples seem very clear from a perpetrator's perspective but are less so from the perspective of the target or student who is being victimised. Sometimes alleged perpetrators report they were only joking when accused of bullying. The accurate identification of "true" bullying cases is even more complicated when the bulling occurs online or by mobile phone.

Imagine the following: Tracey is a Year 9 student who comes to see you because she is being bullied. She tells you that students in her year group are saying nasty things and posting hurtful pictures about her on the Internet. You find out that it was Rachel, another Year 9 student. Rachel tells you that she only posted one picture and it was just meant to be a joke.

If bullying is defined as a repeated act (that is, the definition is from Rachel's perspective) then one act, such as posting an embarrassing picture, may not be considered bullying. However, from the target's perspective (Tracey's), this act may very well be bullying given the picture is available online and can be viewed repeatedly by her and others. To address this definitional challenge, many schools refer to these cyber-related behaviours in their policies, for example, as "cyber aggression" without trying to determine if they are bullying or not, while acknowledging that these behaviours are unacceptable.

Are there different types of bullying behaviours?

A large variety of behaviours can be used to bully others. For example, bullying can be physical, verbal, social, relational, delivered through non-cyber (for example, face-to-face) or cyber means (for example, via phone texting). Physical bullying includes behaviours such as hitting, kicking, pushing, tripping and spitting.[31, 32] These overt behaviours (easily seen) are typically more common in boys and it is relatively easy to identify both the perpetrator and the target.[33] Verbal bullying involves using words to hurt or

humiliate others and includes behaviours such as threats, hurtful teasing and insults.[34, 35] These behaviours are less easy to detect and likely to be a component of nearly all bullying interactions.[36]

Covert bullying refers to behaviours that are hard to see[37] and include indirect, relational and social forms of bullying. The term indirect aggression was introduced in the late 1980s to describe aggressive and bullying behaviours that were not easily noticeable and where the perpetrator's identity was largely concealed.[38] Indirect aggression could, in fact, include very overt acts that are carried out at times where the likelihood of being discovered is minimal (for example, engaging in property damage at night). In addition, indirect aggression could consist of behaviours enacted through a third party so that there is no direct contact between the perpetrator and the target.

Crick and colleagues conceptualised relational aggression as including behaviours that were intended to harm others by damaging relationships or feelings of social acceptance, friendship, or inclusion in peer groups.[39] Thus, relational aggression can comprise many different behaviours, such as playing practical jokes and embarrassing a person, imitating them behind their backs, breaking secrets, being critical, spreading hurtful rumours, sending abusive notes, whispering, and/or maliciously excluding them.[40, 41]

Social bullying (or social aggression) refers to a broad behavioural concept encompassing both indirect and relational aggression that includes behaviours intended to damage or harm a person's social status or self-esteem (or both). These behaviours may include verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumours or social exclusion.[42]

Of course, cyberbullying behaviours are different again given the reliance on ICT as a medium to bully.

The measurement of cyberbullying behaviours represents a challenge for researchers, schools and the community alike because the dynamic environment of the Internet (and mobile phones) means the strategies used to cyberbully others can change. The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study[43]

revealed some very interesting patterns of cyberbullying behaviours which highlighted, for example, the developmental nature of strategies used to victimise others.

Given the uptake of social networking and the use of social media in later adolescence, it is not surprising that social media is used as one of the most common ways to cyberbully young people.44 In contrast, relatively more young children use email than social networking compared to the number of older teenagers who use email versus social networking.45 However, this is likely to change as interest in and uptake of social media becomes more popular. Interestingly, significant differences were found in bullying behaviours between students who were the same age but located in primary versus

secondary schools.[46] This is most likely related to issues related to social changes that occur when young people transition from primary to secondary school.

Examples of bullying behaviour

	DIRECT	INDIRECT
Physical	• hitting, slapping, punching • kicking • pushing • spitting, biting • pinching, scratching • throwing things	• getting another person to harm someone
Verbal	• mean and hurtful name-calling • hurtful teasing • demanding money or possessions • forcing another to do homework or commit offences such as stealing	• spreading nasty rumours • trying to get other students to not like someone
Non-verbal	• threatening and/or obscene gestures	• deliberate exclusion form a group or activity • removing and hiding and/or damaging others' belongings
Cyber	• filming someone without their knowledge or permission • updating someone else's social networking status without their permission • pretending to be someone else on the phone	• telling someone else the words you want them to type as a message • explaining to someone how to engage in bullying via a website the other person may not be familiar with • watching someone engaging in cyberbullying and not trying to stop the bullying

Figure 9. Examples of bullying behaviour [47]

Why do most children not bully?

Although bullying situations are experienced in most schools at some time, bullying does not occur amongst all young people all the time. In fact, most students do not bully others. In general, young people who have developed good social and emotional skills, have positive friends and who have supportive environments at home, at school and in the community are unlikely to bully others.

Nevertheless, some students may use bullying behaviours for a variety of reasons.

Why do some students bully?

Children use bullying behaviours for a variety of reasons. These are mainly personal in nature and typically have little to do with the person who is the target of the bullying. Some of the reasons children bully others include:

- To get what they want
- To be popular and admired
- Because they are afraid of being the one left out
- Jealousy of others
- It seems like fun
- Out of boredom
- It has worked for them before
- They enjoy the power
- They see it as their role, e.g. Leader
- Their significant role models use bullying behaviours

While these reasons help to explain why children bully others, they don't explain how and why the behaviour first starts. Some of the factors associated with the development of bullying in children and young people include:

- Experiencing aggressive behaviour at home and elsewhere
- Being harshly, physically punished at home
- Spending time with peers who bully
- Insufficient adult supervision
- Bullying gives them the social rewards they seek
- Bullying others to prevent being bullied
- Getting attention

What theoretical evidence supports an understanding of bullying behaviour?

Social information processing and bullying

A number of theoretical models are proposed to describe and explain how young people process social information that drives aggressive and bullying behaviours. To date, the most empirically supported model is proposed by Crick and Dodge.[48] The social information processing (SIP) model describes five interrelated cognitive processes, or stages, believed to underlie social behaviours:

1. Internal and external stimuli are encoded.
2. Encoded information is interpreted and attributions of intent and causality are made.
3. A social goal is generated.
4. Responses are generated that will lead to its attainment.
5. The response that is attributed the highest overall value is chosen.[49]

In terms of aggression research, the stages of attribution (Stage 2) and response decision (Stage 5) are the most frequently addressed.

The SIP model is used to describe and distinguish between different forms of aggressive behaviour. The most common distinction between forms of aggression is using the terms reactive and proactive aggression. Reactive aggression is impulsive, highly emotionally charged and most often occurs in response to a frustrating experience. Proactive aggression, on the other hand, is premeditated, controlled, or has the specific intent to harm another.[50,51] When this form of aggression is repeated, it is usually considered bullying. Proactively aggressive children attack others to dominate, steal, tease or coerce.[52, 53] An important distinction between reactive and proactive aggression is that the latter is usually displayed in the absence of provocation or anger.[54] This type of initiated and intentional aggression has its theoretical roots in social learning[55, 56, 57] and is argued to be motivated by a desire for interpersonal dominance or an expectation that aggression is a suitable means of achieving some desired reward (such as money or toys).[58, 59]

Social information processing and proactive aggression

Proactive aggression has been linked with a number of positive and negative outcomes in both short and long-term. The positive qualities of proactive aggression sometimes cause confusion as it is not always clear why aggression in any form would be considered positive. Proactively aggressive younger children for example, can be seen as positive leaders with a good sense of humour, high self-esteem qualities and positive early friendship qualities and

popularity.[60, 61] However, these early positive outcomes soon give way to more functionally and socially negative aspects and by the age of nine these proactively aggressive children are considered to be the most disruptive and aggressive in their peer group.[62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67] Among the most concerning long-term correlates of proactive aggression are adult criminality,[68] bullying in school,[69] delinquency and delinquency-related violence, externalising problems later in life [70, 71, 72] and affiliation

with delinquent peers.[73, 74] Proactively aggressive children also show specific cognitive biases where they are likely to overestimate positive outcomes for aggressing.[75] Connor et al suggest that substance use disorders, a family history of substance abuse and family violence are specifically associated with proactive aggression.[76]

Proactive aggression is also associated with unique impairments in SIP. Unlike reactive aggression, proactive aggression is associated with the response decision stage of the SIP model.[77, 78] As discussed earlier, proactive aggression is maintained by processes such as reinforcement that involve being rewarded in some way for aggressive behaviour. It is logical to assume that being rewarded for aggressive behaviour would lead to positive expectations regarding aggressive behaviour. Proactively aggressive children also report more positive intrapersonal consequences for aggressive behaviour (as in they reported that being aggressive would make them feel better about themselves) and report a greater belief in their ability to successfully carry out an aggressive act.[79]

To date, no studies have examined SIP in relation to cyberbullying. Nonetheless, it is likely that the patterns of information processing associated with cyberbullying will be similar to proactive aggression. However, given the media typically used to engage in cyberbullying and that those who engage in cyberbullying behaviours do not necessarily engage in face-to-face bullying, there may be some subtle differences between how social information is processed in these interactions. For example, the expectation of positive outcomes after aggressive behaviour may be the same for the person cyberbullying but, importantly, the motivation for this behaviour may differ. If, as was suggested by Vandebosch and van Cleemput, those who bully others are more motivated by revenge then the explicit goal is to hurt rather than to dominate or to acquire.[80]

Importantly, due to the nature of the medium in which cyberbullying is enacted, those who bully may not be immediately reinforced for their behaviour. For example, if a person engaging in face-to-face bullying behaviours is motivated (and goal-oriented) to inflict harm primarily using fear, then they will likely be reinforced for this behaviour by the body language and facial expression (as well as the verbal response) of their victim. The reinforcement is immediate and tangible. In contrast, a person engaging in cyberbullying who is motivated to socially hurt others may have to wait for a period of time before the impact is apparent, at least until the text message, picture or other material is distributed among the group.

Similarly, the person engaging in cyberbullying behaviours who is motivated to inflict harm using fear has limited external sources of reinforcement and may have to, at least initially, rely on their own reactions to their acts. The reward for engaging in some forms of cyberbullying could be based to a larger extent

on the expectations the person engaging in bullying behaviours has for how the target person will react versus how the target person is reacting, than is the case with face-to-face bullying. This delay between the act , for example, creating a fake website, and the outcome, for example, sharing secrets with the school, would likely result in a heightened sense of expectation and a built up level of excitement and anticipation for the time when the target person realises what has been done. Thus, it is feasible that a difference exists between those engaging in cyberbullying behaviours versus face-to-face bullying behaviours, according to the generation of goals and the expectations related to the outcome of an interaction. It may be the case that these differences are only observed in relation to different types of cyberbullying.

There are several other theories that could be used to describe aspects of cognition and behaviours associated with bullying. Rather than conduct an exhaustive review, the following addresses the most empirically tested and influential theoretical models that have relevance to bullying behaviours. To date, relatively little theoretical work has been conducted specifically on bullying (and less on cyberbullying) so most of the theoretical models that follow outline the processes that impact on social behaviours and functioning.

Theory of Mind

Theory of Mind is generally described as the ability to recognise and make inferences about the feelings, beliefs or intentions of other people[81] and it has been regarded as a crucial component of effective social communication.[82, 83] Nonetheless, to engage in the higher order cognitive functions required to engage in complex social interactions, it is necessary to firstly have self-awareness to be able to self-reflect.[84] Thus, to be able to reflect on the functions of other people, it is first necessary to have an internal awareness or understanding of those abilities. These skills usually develop around three to five years of age so that by five years most children recognise that other people can have different beliefs than they.

This is a little different than Piaget's model[85] which talks about egocentrism around this age—consistent with the models of moral reasoning and sociomoral reasoning (see following descriptions). Importantly, the awareness that a person has a set of beliefs distinct from my set of beliefs is necessary for me to be able to experience an emotion in response to a situation that I did not directly experience. Therefore, theory of mind must be interpreted as a basic social cognitive skill such that other skills, like empathy, don't develop as well without the existence of the more basic skills. This does not suggest that students who bully others are less able to recognise emotional reactivity in other people but does

provide some basis to explain those who continue along the antisocial trajectory into adulthood and show traits described as psychopathic— that is, lacking in empathy.

Social learning theory and bullying

Another theory that has influenced aggression and bullying research is Bandura's social learning theory. Bandura proposed that aggression was the result of learning and, as such, was no different than any other form of learned behaviour in that it could be acquired, instigated and regulated by the same processes.[86, 87] At the base level, aggression can only be enacted if a person has acquired the requisite skills, for example, a person is not born with the knowledge necessary to shoot a gun but learns how to do this. Bandura argued that a child is not born with aggressive repertoires but can acquire them by observing the actions of others. Through observation, a child can also develop a set of expectations about the likely outcome or response for aggressive behaviour. It has long been known that if these aggressive repertoires are used in the home (especially by the child's parents) then there is a much greater likelihood that this style of social interaction will be used by the child.[88]

Bandura also suggests that modern media, through observational processes, has a significant influence on the development and maintenance of aggressive behaviour.[89] He suggests media violence desensitises and habituates children to aggression, especially when it is presented in terms of good triumphing over evil. Other research also suggests there is a strong relationship between self-reported violent behaviours and television-viewing habits and exposure to violence.[90] Anderson and Dill, in their meta-analytic review, reported a positive relationship between exposure to violent media (specifically violent video games) and aggressive behaviour and delinquency.91 Moreover, Anderson and Bushman reported that violent video games increase aggressive behaviour in both children and young adults.[92]

In terms of the acquisition of aggressive behaviour through direct experience, Bandura noted that it may be possible to acquire a large repertoire of aggressive skills by being directly rewarded for them.[93] Presumably, these behaviours would initially be rewarded in the home and then later by peers. Similarly, many researchers have found that aggressive children are more likely to associate with peers who behave inappropriately[94, 95, 96] which can lead to the maintenance of aggressive behaviour.[97] Bandura suggested that when an aggressor has a positive experience from an aggressive act (for example, when they obtain a desired object through aggressive means) this form of behaviour is reinforced and more likely to be used again.[98]

Bandura suggests reinforcement and punishment are central to the regulation and/or maintenance of aggressive behaviour.[99] If an aggressive child obtained the object of their desire (the reward can be a tangible item or improved or elevated social status) by using aggressive strategies, this behavioural style of interaction will be reinforced both by external

influences as well as by the person themselves. This form of self-reinforcement would be expected if the aggressor placed a high value on being able to enact aggressive strategies competently. According to Bandura, punishment regulates aggressive behaviour by both strengthening or weakening the tendency to be aggressive based on the likelihood this behaviour will be punished, and the nature, severity, timing, and duration of the negative consequences.[100]

What about cyberbullying?

It is interesting to ask if we need separate theories to describe or explain cyberbullying. Although cyberbullying is in many ways bullying, the use of technology adds a level of complexity that can impact both the engagement in and experience of these behaviours. It is important to consider if people cyberbully for different reasons than they bully in non-cyber ways. Although the literature is sparse it can be concluded that the motives are varied. The main reasons provided by students for their cyberbullying behaviour include:

- revenge for being bullied in real life[101, 102]
- a reaction to a previous argument
- a means for the person bullying to display their technological skills
- for fun

Given the motivations, it is highly likely, as suggested by Slonje and Smith, that not having to see the fear in the target's eyes and being less aware of the consequences reduces the potential for empathy and remorse[103] — factors which would lessen the likelihood of future acts of aggression and bullying. However, these reasons offer only anecdotal evidence and, to date, no studies have thoroughly assessed the motivation that drives cyberbullying and whether it is different than for face-to-face bullying.