

## **Symbolic Interactionism and Bullying: A Micro-Sociological Perspective in Education**

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Bullying is a social phenomenon that is currently receiving increased attention from school officials and policymakers, with great emphasis placed on the social and psychological impacts of this behavior on students. Popp, Peguero, Day, and Kahle (2014) express concern, however, over the paucity of research specifically targeted to the educational effects of bullying, especially considering it takes place primarily within the context of the school's environment. Nakamoto and Schwartz (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 33 studies looking at adolescent bullying and reported a significant negative association between bullying and academic performance. Bullying, then, is not an abstract phenomenon for practitioners but one that directly impacts all aspects of the school's mission.

The problem inherent in looking at bullying behavior from a predominantly psychological and social perspective is that it leads to strategies focused on macro structures and systems, when bullying occurs on an individual or micro level, a dissonance Guba and Lincoln (1994) described as "nomothetic/idiographic disjunction" (p. 106). The lack of "fit" between macro approaches and the specific needs of practitioners and students is seen in continued reports of educators' lack of self-efficacy in dealing with bullying (Banas, 2014; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012) and students' decreased academic self-efficacy when involved in bullying behaviors (Popp et al., 2014). Though there is utility for macro-focused research, a more immediate need exists for more micro-focused research in order to provide an efficient way of "dissecting" bullying behavior and its impact on practitioners and students. This will lead to increased efficacy of preventive strategies, practitioner education, and student awareness.

Crotty (1998) posited that research should be led by two fundamental questions: "First, what

methodologies and methods will we be employing in the research we propose to do? Second, how do we justify this choice and use of methodologies and methods?" (p. 2). Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2008) extended this argument by explaining that the thoroughness of inquiry and resultant usefulness of research-based strategies start with asking the right questions when conducting research. They suggested that utilizing an appropriate theoretical framework to ensure cohesion between the problem, the questions, and the methodology directly impacts the utility of the research results. A theoretical framework that effectively guides an understanding of bullying behavior, makes explicit its educational impact, and provides pertinent tools for reversing its effects in schools is Symbolic Interactionism (SI). SI is a sociological paradigm that offers an explanation for the "how" and "why" of behavior by allowing a shift away from a macro-sociological focus on systems and structures to a micro-sociological focus on individual behavior (Lindsey & Beach, 2000). Utilizing SI as a paradigmatic focus for the explication and explanation of bullying behavior will provide researchers with efficient methods for unpacking the causes and effects of bullying behavior, guide research towards more relevant answers, and provide practitioners and students with more appropriate tools for tackling the insidious effects of bullying. This paper will describe the theoretical underpinnings of SI by looking at its historical evolution and paradigmatic frameworks; look at research on bullying from a micro-perspective through a lens of SI; and highlight micro-focused strategies for dealing with bullying behavior that practitioners can easily implement in the classroom.

**Symbolic Interactionism:  
The Theoretical Paradigm**

### **SI's Historical Framework**

Charles Cooley (1864-1929), John Dewey (1859-1952), and George Mead (1863-1931) are the major theorists who had seminal influences on the basic concepts inherent in SI, though Mead is considered the father of SI (Wiebe, Durepos, & Mills, 2010). Mead looked specifically at an individual's self as composed of two components: the "I" and "Me." He conceptualized the "Me" as the "attitudes of others which one assumes as affecting [one's] own conduct" (Mead, 2009, p. 171) and the "I" as that part of self that reacts to this information: the ego.

Mead identified two patterns of interaction central to his concept of the "Me": impression management and impression formation (Carlston & Mae, 2000; Larson & Tsitos, 2013; Schlenker, 2000). Impression management refers to the process by which individuals "attempt to control how others perceive them" (Larson & Tsitos, 2013, p. 308), and Schlenker (2000) explains that people use this process to gain approval and be liked, to present themselves as powerful and accomplish intimidation, or to create a public identity to gain self-authentication. Larson and Tsitos (2013) described impression formation as "the process of inferring meaning about others from gestures, significant symbols, and other characteristics" (p. 308). These pieces of information about another person are integrated to form a global impression of the individual by looking at the interrelationships among different facets of impressions like traits, behaviors, and affect (Carlston & Mae, 2000). Both impression formation and impression management play important roles in researching interpersonal behavior (Larson & Tsitos, 2013) and are excellent lenses through which to view patterns of interaction surrounding bullying behaviors.

In the last half century, SI inquiry separated into two main foci: the Chicago school led by the writings of Mead's student, Herbert Blumer, who actually coined the term "Symbolic Interactionism;" and the Iowa school, led by the writings of Manford Kuhn (Carrothers & Benson, 2003). Blumer was

most concerned with how symbols and interactions affect the ego or the "I," whereas Kuhn focused on how these symbols and interactions affected an individual's perception of self within the context of others: the "Me" (Kuhn, 1964). When practitioners are looking at effective strategies for bullying intervention, therefore, questions surrounding a student's internalized self-image (I), their externalized image of how they perceive others see them (Me), and of how that student sees others (Me), are all constructs made visible through the lens of SI. Apparent, then, is the utility of both an "I" and "Me" foci when understanding bullying behavior and formulating preventive strategies.

### **SI's OEMA**

OEMA represents an acronym for paradigmatic frameworks: Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology, and Axiology. Ponterotto (2005) called them a "paradigm's philosophical anchors" (p. 130) as they provide a framework that guides the research process. By dissecting SI into its philosophical parts, the suitability of this paradigm to bullying research becomes evident.

**Ontology.** Ponterotto (2005) defined ontology as the "nature of reality and being" (p. 130). SI has two fundamental ontological tenets: reality is based on and directed by symbols, and meanings emerge within social interactions (Lindsey & Beach, 2000). Drawing from a pragmatist philosophy, then, SI focuses on human interaction and its central role in creating meaning through the use of symbols. SI proponents maintain that "human beings interact not out of some a priori truth but in relation to mutually defined meanings that are themselves always in sensitive interaction with existing and emerging social realities" (Weibe et al., 2010, p. 909). Aksan, Kisac, Aydin, and Demirbukan (2009) further clarify by explaining that "symbolic interaction[ism] examines the meanings emerging from the reciprocal interaction of individuals in social environment with other individuals and focuses on the question of 'which symbols and meanings emerge from the interaction between people?'" (p. 902). These symbols are the

actions, objects, and/or characteristics that shape our impressions of ourselves and others. They manifest in a social context as: verbal and nonverbal gestures (e.g., eye contact, speech patterns, and posture); indicators of status group membership (e.g., gender, race, hometown, neighborhood); indicators of intelligence (e.g., standardized test score, IQ score); and physical features (e.g., dress, hairstyle, jewelry, height, attractiveness) (Larson & Tsitsos, 2013).

**Epistemology.** Epistemology is defined as the relationship between the researcher and the research participant that directs the interpretation of reality (Ponterotto, 2005), or as Crotty (1998) puts it, “how we know what we know” (p. 3). The epistemological underpinnings informing the theoretical perspective of SI are based on the assumption that the process of interpreting the meanings attached to symbols guides behavior, but that it also allows for modification of these behaviors (Burns, Cross, & Maycock, 2010; Lindsey & Beach, 2000): a perspective grounded in constructionism as opposed to objectivism (Crotty, 1998). These assumptions, when applied to bullying, lead to an understanding that since meaning is constructed, behavior can be modified if the symbols are exposed and the meanings attached to them are reconstructed. This basic premise of SI can therefore positively inform any research and intervention program concerning bullying by focusing attention on the particular symbols most associated with this behavior from the perspective of the victim, the abuser, and bystanders witnessing the abuse. Once these symbols are made explicit, the patterns of interaction directed by the meanings given to these symbols can be exposed and methods put in place to educate, reinforce positive behavior, and negate any social benefits derived from continuing the negative behavior. Burns et al. (2010) specify that looking at bullying from a SI’s paradigm can inform discussions on “social power, group status, reputational support, . . . social contagion, imitation, support for group norms, and diffusion of responsibility” (p. 6).

**Methodology.** SI’s methodology is determined primarily by the school of thought one subscribes to, and when looking at bullying, both have merit for practitioners. From a Chicago perspective, the research would focus on how bullying affects the ego, or the internalized self-talk of the student being bullied, the bully, and bystanders, and how this impacts academic self-efficacy. This will therefore entail more phenomenological research dependent on qualitative methods involving case-studies, interviews, and some forms of ethnography. These methods will involve both educators and students, as it could incorporate interviews of educators in schools with high incidences of this deviant behavior and how this affects job performance as well as interviews with students involved in the behavior. If looking at the issue from an Iowan perspective, however, the focus will be more on interactions between educators, the bully, the victim, and bystanders and may tend to be more quantitative and conducted by surveys.

Of note is that the research methods used through a SI approach will be hermeneutical and dialectical in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Blumer stresses this active participation of the researcher in the methods used for inquiry and explains that the researcher becomes a part of the culture being studied to better “see the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how he interprets what is taken into account” (Blumer, 1969, p. 56). Again, this micro-sociological focus is what makes SI an appropriate framework for studying bullying behavior. The inherent quality and content of the interaction between the researcher and the bullied, the teacher, and/or the one bullying is rich and can expose issues not examinable by quantitative or macro-focused methods.

**Axiology.** An axiological examination makes obvious the values that guide research questions. Within SI’s framework, the researcher’s values are seen as “ineluctable in shaping . . . inquiry outcomes” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). The researcher’s valuation of a need for change is

the driving force of research as s/he sees their research as a vehicle for facilitating reconstructions of reality and stimulating individuals to act on these reconstructions (p. 115). Though the dichotomous nature of SI's framework may impact a researcher's focus on bullying (focus on interpersonal "We" and/or intrapersonal "I"), each school of thought premises their research on effecting change.

### **Bullying and Research**

Booth et al. (2008) posit that research sometimes looks at practical problems that cause harm and can be solved by "doing something (or by encouraging others to do something) that eliminates the problem or at least ameliorates its costs" (p. 52). Implied is that research is both needed and helpful in providing insight into how the problem can be solved. The very nature of bullying and its impacts make research into this practical problem a necessity.

Research on bullying began in the late 1970s with Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus (Brank, Hoetger, & Hazen, 2012). Olweus (1996) defined bullying as occurring when "a student... is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students." (p. 265). Negative actions are when someone intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another and can be carried out by physical contact, words, mean gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group (Olweus, 1996). An imbalance of power usually exists in which the victim is somewhat helpless against the student who harasses (Olweus, 1996).

The standard Olweus definition of bullying is still used by most researchers, but due to the subjective nature of bullying and the different perspectives of those reporting bullying, measuring the presence and occurrence of bullying can be problematic (Brank et al., 2012). Data collection techniques that measure bullying tend to include a combination of self-reports, peer nominations, or teacher nominations (Brank et al., 2012). Although this combination helps to reduce subjectivity, race, gender, and age can influence respondents' views of

bullying (Bradshaw & Waasdrop, 2009; Brank et al., 2012). Research has shown that teachers and students often define bullying differently and students' ideas about bullying tend to differ from research definitions of bullying (Brank et al., 2012; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006). Approaching the issue of bullying through the lens of SI allows researchers to further examine these different perspectives, the patterns of interaction and symbols involved with bullying, and conduct research on how these symbols create meaning. These foundations also prompt researchers to offer research-based suggestions on correctional strategies for practitioners.

### **Patterns of Interaction and Symbols**

Four main types of bullying have been identified through research: physical, verbal, relational, and cyber (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel 2009). Physical bullying includes hitting, punching, pushing, or other physical acts of aggression. Verbal bullying includes name calling, teasing, verbal threats, or other spoken aggressions. Relational bullying involves spreading rumors, withholding friendship, or leaving others out of activities (Brank et al., 2012). Cyber-bullying – a more recent form of bullying – is seen as any kind of harassment or bullying perpetrated through technology (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). More challenging for a researcher looking at computer-mediated communications is the cloak of invisibility that accompanies these behaviors. Traditional patterns of interaction associated with bullying which required face-to-face episodes, what Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013) identified in their work as co-presence, have changed: the bully now has the ability to remain anonymous when perpetrating this behavior. This new form of interaction among students is one which has its own symbols, meanings, and dramatic effects. Research using a SI methodological approach can help expose these behaviors and suggest to practitioners effective tools for dealing with this rapidly growing phenomenon.

Bullying is a complex social issue in which students play many different roles. Students can bully, be bullied by others, assist the bully, encourage bullying behavior, defend the student being bullied, or be bystanders (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [HHS], n.d.). There are several factors that can cause a student to become a bully or a victim of bullying. Examining these factors through the lens of SI's impression management and formation is necessary in order to better understand why bullying behavior occurs and help researchers identify ways to prevent it.

Students who exhibit hyperactivity, impulsiveness, a lack of empathy, and lower IQs are more likely to become bullies (Brank et al., 2012). These factors are believed to, "contribute to bullying because students who are impulsive and hyperactive, but also low on empathy, might not be able to understand how their actions hurt others" (Brank et al., 2012, p. 217). Students with larger social circles and strong leadership skills, although seen as positive traits, can also make students more likely to engage in bullying (Brank et al., 2012). Family variables can also contribute to the likeliness of a student to engage in bullying, such as witnessing domestic violence, parental conviction of a crime, or lack of parental involvement (Brank et al., 2012).

Students who become victims of bullying share characteristics like social anxiety, submissiveness, low self-esteem, not getting along well with others (or being labeled annoying/provoking), and few high-quality friendships (Brank et al., 2012; HHS, n.d.). Physical disabilities, learning differences, sexual or gender identity differences, and cultural differences can also contribute to students' likelihood to being bullied because they are often perceived as different from their peers (CDC, 2014; HHS, n.d.).

Practitioner training on awareness of these characteristics (symbols), how they are interpreted by the student and their peers, and the patterns of interaction they create is crucial. This allows practitioners to become more alert to the possibility

of bullying activity and increase the likelihood of early intervention.

### **Negative Effects**

The negative effects of bullying involve depression, anxiety, interpersonal violence or sexual violence, substance abuse, and poor social functioning (CDC, 2014). Of pertinent importance to practitioners is that it also negatively impacts academic performance and self-efficacy. These negative impacts often result in poor attendance, lower grade point averages and lower standardized test scores (CDC, 2014). Students who have witnessed bullying behavior (but not participated in such behaviors) can also have more feelings of helplessness than students who have not witnessed such behaviors (CDC, 2014), also having potential impacts on academic self-efficacy.

Students involved with bullying are also at an increased risk for suicide-related behavior when compared to students who are not involved with bullying (CDC, 2014). Suicide-related behaviors include suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and suicide (CDC, 2014). Any involvement with bullying behavior is considered a stressor that can contribute to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness - feelings often expressed by people who engage in suicide-related behavior. Suicide-related behavior is a complex public health problem involving a combination of risk factors. Although it remains unclear if bullying directly causes suicide-related behavior, there is a relationship between involvement with bullying and suicide (CDC, 2014), and Banas (2014) also stressed the negative impact of suicide-related behavior on academic achievement.

Media reports linking bullying to recent school shootings and cases of teen suicide in the United States have prompted many professionals to consider bullying and its impact on students. In working with students, school psychologists and social workers need to be aware of bullying behaviors, their potentially damaging consequences for victims, and school-based interventions for preventing bullying, coercion, and violence

(Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005), making research that provides effective tools for identifying and handling bullying a necessity for practitioners.

### **Implications for Practice**

Research on bully intervention programs is mixed. While some researchers conclude that school programs aimed at reducing bullying are effective, others contend that these programs are ineffectual at best, and the results of two recent meta-analyses indicate that only one-third of the programs evaluated produced positive effects (Allen, 2010). Sociologists argue the available research has certainly helped to improve the anti-bullying intervention programs and to predict models of victimization and perpetration. Due to the predominantly macro nature of previous research and the methodological approaches utilized, however, there are still several difficulties identified with: (a) not considering the subjective point of view of students and their definition of aggression, often different from the one proposed by adults; (b) underestimating the role of adults and their relationships with the victims in modifying or exacerbating hostilities between peers; and (c) conceptualizing bullying as an intrapersonal phenomenon only (the characteristics of the bully and/or the victim) and not also considering interpersonal patterns of interaction (Swain, 1998). Ensuring appropriate research for practitioners, then, is a need that must be addressed.

### **A Common Language**

Teachers and students experience reality in different ways. Their perceptions of what is happening and why it is happening seem diametrically opposed. Whereas students are very aware of the peer culture and know what is going on during peer interactions, teachers seem to be less sensitive to negative patterns on interaction among the student population. Teachers are more focused on educational issues and how students learn versus knowing where and when bullying occurs, who bullies, and who is being bullied. In addition,

students do not always understand the scope of action that can be taken against bullying and are dependent on adults' understanding, positive action, and support. When bullying occurs in the classroom, students feel uncertain of how to act and, if teachers do not respond to these acts, bullying takes on the "symbol" of a type of behavior that is both tolerated and ignored. Franberg and Wrethander (2012) found that teachers rarely detect bullying and take action in only 4% of the cases. Students, however, respond to questioning based on their own understanding of bullying so it is important for the teacher to understand their definition of the behavior (Franberg & Wrethander, 2012). Interviews and case study accounts are effective ways of getting this information into the hands of practitioners.

### **An Effective Plan**

With the incidences of bullying increasing in recent years, it is imperative for educators to have a strategic plan to counteract the problem. As already discussed, however, many teachers do not have enough training or knowledge on how to respond to bullying (Banas, 2014; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012), and Allen (2010) found that programs that had at least marginal success provided parents, staff, and students with education/training and awareness.

Enforcement of a school policy on bullying can be difficult to implement because of the secretive nature of bullying and the limited information that adults can gather on a bullying case. Some schools implement zero-tolerance policies hoping students will get the message that anti-bullying measures are strictly enforced; however, research indicates these policies often do not reduce the problems (Allen, 2010). Although they are appealing to educators who wish for strong consequences for violence, zero-tolerance policies usually fail because educators do not use them in a rational manner, but rather in a way reflecting racial and gender (Allen, 2010). In addition, these policies do not investigate the relationships between people and the role that impression formation, labels, and

interactions play in bullying (Iudici & Faccio, 2013).

Even though there may be guidelines and strategic plans to reduce the incidence of bullying at a given school, educators need to understand that implementing an effective anti-bullying program is not a simple task that can be fulfilled in a single session; instead, it must be a prolonged and detailed effort involving all members of the school community in order to change the culture of bullying. Administrators need to remember that schools vary widely in demographics and organization, and that what will work in one school will not necessarily work in another school. Reliance on school specific plans (micro) as opposed to district plans (macro) will therefore provide a more effective approach. Micro interventions would include peer support methods that incorporate cooperative group work in the classroom such as circle time for the class to address relationship issues, circles of friends who provide a support team of peers to work with a vulnerable pupil, and “befriending” in which a pupil is assigned to be friends with a specific peer. Another example would include a school tribunal or a “bully court” where pupils are elected to hear evidence and decide on sanctions for those involved in bullying (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003). Research shows the efficacy of these approaches and they are easy for teachers to implement in their classrooms.

Interactionism researchers suggest that a student actually taking on the patterns of interaction of a bully may activate process labeling and oversimplification of reality (Swain, 1998). According to this perspective, the following characteristics must be addressed when looking at bullying in schools: (a) arrogance is not an intrinsic property of the person, but a property given to him or her by the social community and by social norms; (b) bullying is the result of the application of labels and sanctions by the offender based on symbols; (c) it is necessary to abandon the meanings that are constructed from symbols that cause a bully to act in a manner that is expected; (d) the bullying is generated within an existential path

that can be defined in terms of a “career” in which s/he learns techniques, rules of conduct, justification, and mature beliefs, interest, and opinions; and (e) the basis of the school’s context, laws, and rules on which criteria actions are transformed into transgressions is of fundamental importance (Swain, 1998). An implication in the application of SI, then, is to redefine the symbols associated with bullying and reconstruct the “learning” of the one bullying.

Considering prevaricating actions as a cultural form means to analyze the ways in which students and adults participate in a cultural process and generate communicative modes that assume the form of bullying. It becomes central to an investigation of bullying to develop new observation categories such as social assigned roles, adults’ roles in re-constructing and re-distributing power, and the role of the education system (Iudici & Faccio, 2013). The study of roles is essential because they allow specific identities of self and other representations. A student cannot tell his teacher whatever he thinks; he may say only what is allowed by his role. Identifying roles assigned from time to time in various contexts allows an observer to distinguish participants who contribute to and influence the communication process. A problem of primary interest for studies on this theme is the presence and relevance of roles in the “culture of prevaricating action” and the ability to check whether and who interprets the role of a bully, helper bully, victim, and spectator (Iudici & Faccio, 2013). In Canada, a study conducted over two decades with middle school students found curriculum work to be an effective intervention approach that brings teacher and students together on the topic of bullying. Through the reading and writing content area, teachers can incorporate bullying through role-play activities, literature, and quality circles (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

Offensive actions must also be studied to understand the whole phenomenon of bullying, as offensive actions represent only the tip of a way of thinking, which is expressed through narratives. Those stories are the best types of interactions,

especially from the expressive point of view (what that gesture or action communicates) and instrumental point of view (the effects on who performs the action as well as the benefits that the symbolic action contains) (De Leo, 2002). The relationship between bully and action is the same that exists between the actor and the script read. Smorti, Ciucci, Smith, and Brain (2000) claim the specificity of an intervention in the school context should, therefore, encourage investigation into how those narratives allow the offensive action. This type of narrative study can effectively be accomplished from a SI paradigmatic study. In Australia, “community conferencing” brings together a community of students in conflict so the perpetrator meets the victim and each are accompanied by a friend, family member, or other supporter. The perpetrator makes reparation, and the incident is regarded as finished (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

Smorti et al. (2000) found that research on bullying and cyber-bullying seldom consider adults. Scholars tend to assign them a key role in reacting to bullying or engaging in preventive or reparative interventions rather than their role in constructing the meaning or perceptions of bullying. This would explain the proliferation of programs and manuals that provide reactionary instead of preventive recommendations for parents and teachers. Since SI looks at all patterns of interaction during research, they may ask: Might these tools be effective without understanding the participation of adults in communication with students as contributing to the culture of prevarication? To act against bullying, or worse against the bully, without evaluating all this, means to diminish the phenomenon and paradoxically exclude from intervention potential unwilling contributors to an abusive culture (Smorti et al., 2000).

### **Conclusion**

To build an effective plan counteracting bullying, it is necessary to pay attention to the symbolic narratives that perpetuate this behavior.

Smorti et al. (2000) posit that once these are made clear, we must analyze the construction of meanings that actors attribute to these narratives and give special attention to the relational roles which frame and dictate the resultant forms of communication between peers, students, and adults within a school system. As proponents of learning and student self-actualization, we as researcher-practitioners are no longer willing to remain passive to this behavior which carries such a high social cost. Edson (1986) claims “there is widespread agreement with the truism that the world is full of the right answers to bad questions” (p. 14). With such a critical value dependent on the accuracy of our answers, we must ensure our questions are the right ones. Armed with symbolic interactionism’s micro-sociological tool-kit, we can continue to address the urgent needs of our hurting students.

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