The Path through Bullying—A Process Model from the Inside Story of Bullies in Hong Kong Secondary Schools

Debbie O. B. Lam and Arthur W. H. Liu

ABSTRACT: The process of how youngsters become bullies and slowly withdraw the behavior was explored through in-depth interviews of eight bullies in a secondary school in Hong Kong. Most respondents sympathized with the victims initially. They started to bully others for various reasons. Gains of security, power, material benefit, fun, and emotional release reinforced the behavior. Inhibition was influenced by school discipline and family response. The relative forces of the encouraging and inhibiting factors in the process determined the perpetuation or termination of the behavior. A four-phase model is developed to explain the dynamics. The implications of the findings are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Bully; Victim; School; Violence; Gang; Aggression.

Introduction

Most people think of school as a safe nurturing ground for children. However, in recent years, it has emerged that school can be a place of violence. In the US, there is increasing interest in the problem because of several murders committed by adolescent boys—some of the attacks took place on campus. Though outside the US such shocking violence is, so far at least, yet to be seen in schools, the problem of bullying in schools is becoming prominent. Smith et al. (1999) comment that school violence occurs in so many places that it can be

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considered as an international problem. In New South Wales, Australia, Forero, McLellan, Rissel, and Bauman (1999) did a cross-sectional survey of 3,918 children at year 6, 8, and 10. They found that 23.7% of the respondents were bullies and 12.7% were victims; 21.7% were both bullies and victims. Only 42.4% had experience of neither. Surveys of bullying have been carried out in Europe (King, Wold, Tudor-Smith, & Harel, 1996), North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan (Nansel et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1999). The rates of bullying in different places vary, but the phenomenon is common. As Tattum and Herbert (1993) comment, “there is bullying in all schools, regardless of age-range, type, locality or composition of intake” (p. 4).

The problem has not been much explored in Chinese communities, though it is currently gaining more attention in Hong Kong. The Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCAHK, 2000) surveyed 1,346 students studying at the Primary 5 to Form 3 (equivalent to year 5 to year 9 in the US, Form 3 refers to the third year in the local secondary school system) levels and found that over half of the respondents had experienced bullying in school in the previous year. Another local study sponsored by the Southern District Fight Crime Committee (SDFCC, 2000) surveyed about 22% (2,142) of the local students studying in Primary 5 and 6, and Form 1 and 2 (equivalent to year 5 to year 8 in the US) in the district of Aberdeen. It found that within the previous 6 months, as many as 68% of the respondents had bullied others, while some 73% claimed they had been bullied. The figures are indeed alarming. However, they do not necessarily represent a much bigger problem than that seen elsewhere, as the great difference in figures for bullying from different countries could be due to the difference in the measuring instruments employed and the sample sizes involved. For example, in one Australian (Forero et al., 1999) and one US study (Nansel et al., 2001), students were asked to report if they had bullied others or been bullied without particular bullying behavior being specified. Both studies used a general definition of bullying: “Bullying is when another student, or group of students, says or does nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a way he or she does not like. But it is not bullying when two students about the same strength quarrel or fight.” (Forero et al., 1999, p.345). Each study analyzed the data differently. Forero and his colleagues dichotomized the responses into two groups: those of students who had not experienced bullying behavior and those of students who had (once or more). In the study
of Nansel et al. (2001), the responses were categorized into mild, moderate, and frequent bullying. In the two local studies mentioned above, the respondents were asked if they had committed specific bullying behaviors. In the BGCAHK study, the list included: verbal insult, malicious teasing, stealing, destruction of property, threat, physical violence, extortion, sexual abuse, and being forced to join illegal societies. The study by SDFCC did not ask about the destruction of others' property, but did include boycotting of the victim. The time frame for reporting bullying experience also varies between studies. Respondents may be asked about their bullying experience in the past semester (Nansel et al., 2001) “in this term” (Forero et al., 1999), in the past 6 months (SDFCC, 2000), or in the past year (BGCAHK, 2000).

In their discussion of the different instruments employed in different studies, Wolke, Woods, Stanford, and Schulz (2001) call attention to the fact that in different countries, there are different cultural meanings of victimization and bullying. To understand bullying behavior in a given place, it is necessary to understand the local culture. Previous studies in Hong Kong followed the predominant quantitative approach to the study of bullying by tracking the prevalence and forms of bullying or by analyzing the victims’ coping response. Many questions, however, remain unanswered. How do young people become bullies? Why do they do so? How do they feel about their behavior? What might change their behavior? In order to answer these questions, the author carried out a qualitative study that explored the phenomenon of bullying by focusing on the inside story of bullies.

**A Review of the Causes of Bullying**

Roland (1998) defines bullying as “long-standing violence, physical or psychological, conducted by an individual or a group and directed against an individual who is not able to defend himself in the actual situation” (pp. 21–32). The existence of power differences and the varied forms of bullying are commonly agreed elements. A number of research studies have explored the causes of bullying. Though the results are not totally consistent, some significant variables have been identified. These can be categorized as individual factors, family dysfunction factors, socio-cultural factors, group influence factors, and school factors.
Individual Factors

Individual factors include physical strength and aggressive reaction in determining the role of bullies and victims. Olweus (1978) found that bullies are physically stronger than average, while victims are physically weaker. As not all strong boys are bullies, he comes up with the proposition that a combination of physical strength and an aggressive reaction pattern is the most important factor. However, why some boys are more aggressive than others has not been explained. While some people propose that it is determined by genetic factors, this assumption lacks empirical support.

Family Factors

Other researchers have investigated the family functioning dimension. Dominating parenting style (Rigby, 1993, 1996), permissive parenting style and lack of involvement and warmth (Olweus, 1980), harsh discipline (Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992), and abusive experience (George & Main, 1979; Walker, Downey, & Bergman, 1989; Williamson, Bourduin, & Howe, 1991) all seem to be relevant family factors. Chinese families are known to be more authoritarian than is typical in Western countries. This might explain the high prevalence of bullies in Hong Kong. However, modern Chinese parents are definitely not as authoritarian as their predecessors, and there is a law in Hong Kong against the use of corporal punishment against children. The increase of school violence locally ("Complaints of school violence," 2000) simply cannot be explained by the family factor alone.

Mass Media

Derksen and Strasburger (1996) argue that the cause of increased youth violence lies in media violence. They suggest that the effect of the media is subtle and ingrained over time by the repetition of images and stereotypes that offer children distorted information about gender, roles, and violence. Violence is always shown as an acceptable means of conflict resolution in the media. Children could be unconsciously modeling undesirable behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Heusmann, 1982). But it is a controversial subject as it is obvious that most people exposed to the same media do not become bullies. The social environment does not seem to be deterministic in affecting such behavior.
Peer Factors

Adolescence is the time when individuals seek their identity and establish their own reference group. Research on street gangs suggests that reference groups have profound effects on human behavior (Spergel, 1967; Whyte; 1943). Group pressure, group norms, group identification, and dilution of responsibility are key factors. But the direction of influence from the group to the individual is not one way. Studies have shown that people most often choose to join groups with members who are like themselves; who have similar values and attitudes (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Kass, 1999). So the group factor cannot rule out the part played by individual factors.

School Environment

Olweus (1993) found that the number of teachers assigned to supervise student break times was negatively associated with the number of bullying incidents. Other researchers focus on the impact of the school climate. Licata (1987) suggests that a positive attitude among students and staff can lead to positive behaviors, thus reducing bullying behavior. Rigby (1996) found that the more students held beliefs such as "might is right" or "victims should not complain," the poorer was the school ethos and the more serious was the bullying problem.

Bullying is a form of violence. As the National Institute of Mental Health (2000) concluded from an analysis of youth violence, a number of variables affecting it have been identified, but no single theory fully explains the problem. Many of these factors have been identified through quantitative studies. How bullies subjectively feel is rarely explored. A study on how people become bullies is necessary to help shed light on more effective intervention strategies.

Research Method

The present study was a qualitative study that sought to gather data from the self-reported histories of bullies. The in-depth interview was used to tap their subjective interpretation of the bullying experience. It is not easy to persuade bullies to be interviewed. They usually do not disclose much about their bullying activities to
anybody associated with their school, as they know the activities are not acceptable in school. For this study, the school social worker acted as an interviewer. The students invited to participate were assured that what they said would just be used for research purposes and would not be disclosed to the school authorities. As the students knew the social worker, they eventually accepted the invitation.

The school was a typical local school with an all-Chinese student population. The bullying problem was recognized by the staff, but the extent of the problem was unknown. The school principal recognized the value of the study and so gave permission for it to be carried out in the school. In this study, “bully” refers to someone who fairly frequently intentionally inflicts distress or physical harm on other people. It was also necessary for the respondents to identify themselves as adopting such a role.

The initial identification of bullies was carried out through a review of the interviewer’s own cases and recommendations from students and teachers. A total of eight bullies were interviewed. According to McCracken (1988), eight persons is an adequate sample size if the contact with the informants is long enough. To enhance the variety within the sample, the informants were chosen from different years—from Form 1 to Form 4 (equivalent to year 7 to year 10 in the US). Bullying is rare among Form 5 students in Hong Kong, so they were not included. We did not know the respondents' full bullying history beforehand, but some respondents were known to have reduced or stopped their bullying behavior. They were purposely invited to participate so that the factors affecting such changes could be explored.

The interviews were semi-structured. The respondents were asked when they first witnessed bullying, how they perceived bullying, when they started bullying, why they bullied, what consequences they experienced, what effect these consequences had on their bullying behavior, and how they perceived their continuation of such behavior. The respondents were given a great deal of freedom to describe their experiences and share their perceptions. The first interview lasted for one and a half hours. The whole process was audio-taped with the approval of the respondents. The grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was adopted. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed soon after. Any concepts, categories, or hypotheses that were developed were checked against the available data. There was a constant comparative analysis across
the different cases. The interview guide was modified as new significant data were identified. Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify some of the statements made by the respondents and for supplementary data collection when necessary. It was basically a cross-sectional study involving retrospective reporting and the respondents' reflections on their own experience.

As this is a qualitative study, the validity of the data is assessed in terms of the data's credibility. Credibility refers to the extent to which credible findings and interpretation are produced. It can be likened to internal validity in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation is a key technique to ensure credibility. As suggested by Denzin (1970), triangulation leads to credibility by using different or multiple sources of data (time, space, person), methods (observations, interviews, videotapes, photographs, documents), investigators (single or multiple), or theory (single versus multiple perspectives of analysis). Triangulation by use of multiple theories is difficult and is an element that few investigations achieve (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The most common form of triangulation involves the use of multiple sources of information and methods to gather data so that the consistency of the findings can be checked.

The credibility of the data in this study could be established through triangulating multiple sources of data and methods. The data collected during the interviews were generally consistent with the respondents' student records, as well as with the researcher's knowledge of the school environment as a whole. The coding and interpretation of the data was agreed on by the interviewer and the supervisor. The findings also did not contradict the general picture provided by other local survey studies.

There are definite limitations to the study. Since the interviews provided much more information on the bullying phenomenon in the school and greater detail on the changes an individual goes through in becoming a bully than what could be found in the student files or the social worker's case files, some of the data could not be triangulated. Further interviews with the peers and family members of the respondents might have been a way to strengthen the credibility, but soliciting the cooperation of these respondents would have been fairly difficult. Another limitation is due to the source of samples. This study selected all samples from the same school where the interviewer was working as the school social worker. While this
allowed easier access to the other sources of data and easier engagement with the students, it meant that the participants were exposed to the same kind of school environment. Getting samples from more schools could have enriched the data related to the influence of school ethos. Also, because all the samples in this study were of boys, a study of girls is necessary to be able to ascertain the gender difference. Despite these limitations, a process model has been developed based on the data collected and is introduced here for professional sharing.

**Some Background Data**

All eight respondents came from the same school, which was considered by the community to be of a low educational quality. There were two respondents from each form, from Form 1 to Form 4, who were all boys aged from 12 to 17. All but one respondent had intact families. Except for one respondent who started in year 1 in primary school and another who started in Form 2, they all started bullying others in Form 1. The forms of bullying included verbal abuse, physical bullying, extortion, and coercion. Six of them admitted they belonged to the Triads, which is an established closed criminal fraternity active in criminal activities both local and international (see Booth, 1990). Triad membership is a criminal offence in Hong Kong.

**The Path to Bullying—A Process Model**

The process of becoming a bully can be separated into different phases: the rejecting phase, the performing phase, the perpetuating phase, and the withdrawing phase. From the information provided by the respondents, we gained a picture of how different factors operate during different phases.

*Rejecting Phase—Identifying with the Victims.* All the respondents witnessed bullying behavior from their classmates in primary school. At the time, they disliked the bullies and sympathized with the victims. Some of their remarks were as follows:

Sometimes, I thought they were very disgusting. If others refused to give them money, they would beat them. (Eric)
I felt they were coercive, very disgusting. They should not force people to do things that they didn’t want to do. (Stephen)
They [the victims] were so miserable. Even when they were unwilling, they were forced to do what the bully told them to do. (Stephen)
In the toilet on the first floor, he just kicked the door which directly hit the other student. I actually saw other students beat that guy up.
Isn’t it terrible? (Sam)

The exposure to the bullying incidents did not immediately lead them to imitate the behavior. They knew how people bully others, but most of them considered the behavior disgusting and intimidating. Their identification was with the victims. One exception was Ben. His family had Triad connections, so he was used to certain common behaviors of Triad members such as using foul language and threatening others. He did not feel that he had “learned” the bullying behavior he had witnessed, and it seemed as though he had never identified with the victims. As he said: “Actually you don’t need to learn how to bully others. If your friends are bad guys, you can’t be very different.”
He was apparently just naturally socialized into this sort of behavior and his identification was always with the bullies.

Performing Phase—Moving Toward Becoming a Bully. After the respondents entered Form 1, they witnessed more bullying at school and in the neighborhood, often of a more serious nature. They gave different reasons for why they started their bullying behavior. A number of push and pull factors were involved. A common justification was that they did not want to play the role of victim. Some who had friends to support them just fought back when they were bullied and ultimately became bullies themselves. Ben’s story illustrates this reactive aggression:

In the first few days of the school term, I was already bullied. During the lesson, someone gave me nasty hand gestures; probably he thought that he could bully me... So one day when he did that again to me during the class, I said, “You do that once more and I will beat you up.” He did it again anyway and challenged me: “You can tell the teacher. Don’t you go away. We’ll meet at the basketball court.” But he did not turn up... I already had some pals in the class by then. We ran to the bus stop to grab him. He then said he was sorry and promised not to do it again.

The availability of friends who would back one up is important. While this episode may be considered more as an example of fighting back than typical bullying, it illustrates how some boys
experienced a sense of collective power and realized the possibility of taking on the bully’s role. Later, they became bullies themselves.

Stephen bullied others for a different reason. He said he just suddenly became very bad tempered in Form 3 and started bullying others:

I learned from people in Block 20 [of the housing estate where I lived] that you don’t need to say anything when you punch somebody. I just hit him if I don’t like the person. Previously, I was not brave enough to do so. But I don’t know why I had a stronger temper in Form 3 and Form 4 and so could do it.

His early exposure to bullying showed him an example of aggressive behavior, but he did not perform bullying behavior himself until he felt a need for emotional release:

I was annoyed by my parents’ nagging. So I just vented my anger at school. Sometimes, I tried to get rid of my irritation by playing basketball. But when that did not help, I bullied others to vent my emotion.

For other respondents, their bullying behavior seemed to be a result of their association with school gangs or Triad societies outside school. The fear and realities of bullying gave them a great sense of insecurity in school, so when the opportunity arose, they joined Triads for protection. They chose to be bullies rather than endure the fear of becoming victims. Sam explained clearly his change from victim to bully:

After about a month, we got to know each other. Then they [the Triad members] said, “Do you want to be blackmailed or do you want to blackmail others? You had better think.” They just enticed you to join them, made you feel very secure, so I just joined them... You know, I don’t want to be bullied. I want to be dominant and subdue others.

Sam felt it was natural to change his role in such circumstances. Ronald’s experience was similar:

I was afraid that I would be the one to get punched next. I was caught in the dilemma of whether to stay away from them [the Triad members] or hang out with them. Initially, I wanted to stay away from them. One of my classmates was a member of their group. I got to know him; later, we hung out with the gang... We treat them as friends. They’ll help us if we’re in trouble.

For these boys, protection comes from the Triads, not from the school administration.
Material reward could be another enticement to perform bullying behavior. Eric saw some senior students extort money from junior students. The experience encouraged him to do the same as a way of obtaining money easily. As he recalled:

It was at the start of Form 1 that I saw someone asking others for $30 (about US$3.80). I just saw the person raise his hand, then the other one became very scared and gave him $30... It looked great! You don't need to work but you end up with money... So later, when I saw some people bullying others, I followed their lead. When I saw some students beat up someone else, I joined in. They punched him and I did the same.

While some respondents bullied as a way of gaining emotional release, others as a way of protecting themselves, and still others for monetary reward, Jack claimed that he bullied for fun. This seems to be an example of the fluidity of moral values of youths of that age. As he described:

I bully others as I always saw somebody bullying others. In Form 1, I saw my classmates did that and I just joined them for fun. They sometimes punched or kicked people, or called people names. They asked me to join in. So I did.

According to Bandura (1977), we often learn through imitation due to vicarious reinforcement. This goes some way to explaining the experiences of these boys, but the acts of imitation in their case did not come right away. Other factors triggered their bullying behavior. This could be the provocative behavior of others, mood disturbances that demanded an aggression outlet, personal greed, or peer support for the behavior. An invitation to join a gang creates an opportunity of joining the powerful and leaving behind the powerless.

Perpetuating Phase—Enjoying Being a Bully. Whether the behavior continues depends on the presence and strength of inhibiting or encouraging factors. A number of factors were identified.

(1) Encouraging Factors. The benefits are obviously encouraging factors. Bullying behaviors are reinforced by the desires for psychological security, material reward, fun, or emotional release. In addition, as the behavior is repeated, the feeling of power and prestige becomes more obvious. The following comments show this:
You know, that’s cool! Those idiots were afraid of me. (Tom)
Of course I want to be tough. [Bullying schoolmates is] 50% for power,
30% for protection, and 20% for benefits. (Sam)
I want to be the big brother [of a Triad society]. I want to play. That’s
fun stuff in the school! (Charles)
I feel strong and smart! When you bully others, others don’t dare to
fight back. (Stephen)
I find it fun. I feel powerful when I can bully others without conse-
quenoes. I have my Triad big brother at my back. (Ben)

Triad membership is a powerful encouraging factor as members
are obliged to follow the Triad norms. Members of the same Triad
support each other in bullying others.

(2) Inhibiting Factors. School punishment, control exerted by the
family, and sympathy for the victims are possible inhibiting factors.
Unfortunately, the inhibiting effect on the respondents appeared to
be inadequate.

As the respondents indicated, the victims and the bystanders usually
did not dare report bullying incidents to teachers or their par-
ents for fear of creating further trouble. Teachers also failed to give
the impression that they could protect the victims.

Those who are bullied are chicken. They are afraid that they will be
harassed and beaten up again. (Jack)
The bystanders make no responses. Some of them feel happy and
laugh. (Ben)
The bystanders won’t pay attention to what is happening. They are
afraid that they will be beaten up. (Ronald)
Teachers also know there are bullying incidents. However, the victims
would say that they only hurt themselves as they fear the bullies’ tak-
ing revenge. (Charles)
They will hit you several times a day if you complain... They won’t
stop their retaliation until you stop reporting them to the teachers.
(Sam)
It is useless to report bullying incidents to the teachers because some
of the teachers won’t help you. Even if you report them, the teachers
will suspect that you are the one who started the conflict. (Ronald).

So the chance of an incidence of bullying being reported was slim.
Even if it was reported, the teacher would not necessarily take
action. Forms of disciplinary action included forcing the bullies to
stand outside the staff room, giving them demerits, giving them
detention, informing their parents about the incident, and so on. But
the inhibiting effects of these actions were minimal. In the words of
some of the respondents:
The teachers know, but do not take action; they may just walk over and say a few words. If they see it happening again, they may ask us to stand. But what use would it be, just standing? (Stephen)
I would initially regret what I had done if I was caught. But afterwards, I would not care about it. (Eric)
At the beginning, I was afraid of being punished by the teachers, but afterwards, I wasn't afraid anymore. (Charles)

Clearly, some of the disciplinary actions have no effect. Others, like detention or informing the parents, can be slightly inhibiting, but the effect still seems short term:

Detention and giving demerits are effective. If you don't want to get a demerit or your parents to find out about it, you will not bully others. (Jack)
I would try to cut down my bullying behavior if I was not allowed to have lunch or if I had to stay behind after school. But after a while, I would forget about it and start bullying others, until I am punished again next time. (Stephen)
If the teacher informed my parents, I would try to hold back a little. Who would like to hear the annoying nagging? (Stephen)

In fact, according to the respondents, reproaches from parents can exacerbate the bullying. It only makes them feel rejected and looked down upon at home and so they want to further assert their powerful status at school. Ronald and Stephen, for example, would just vent their unhappy emotions after receiving their parents' scolding by bullying others.

The changes in attitude of these respondents toward bullying are worth examining. The moral standard of these youngsters should be an inhibiting factor; after all, they pitied the victims when they first witnessed bullying incidents. But as time went on, they claimed that those who were bullied were not victims as they “deserved” to be bullied. Clearly, they learned to justify their actions. They described the targets of their bullying behavior as follows:

He's a horrible person, always so annoying! His words are offensive and repulsive. Sometimes, he speaks foul language to others for no reason... I think he is disgusting! (Eric)
We won't pick on just anybody and bully them intentionally. Often, we bully those jerks that are too annoying. They stare at you or do not apologize when they bump into you. They won't queue properly when they buy snacks. (Ben)
I bully those who offend me verbally, those who curse me or call me names. I get money from my classmates. Those who are rich have to pay me more. (Charles)
We target jerks hated by the whole class. We feel the ways in which they talk and behave are disgusting. (Jack)
[My targets are] those who have annoying manners, have a nasty appearance, talk bullshit, and use foul language all the time. (Ronald)

The common excuse was that their victims were offensive and hateful, so the respondents were just teaching them a lesson. The respondents also chose the vulnerable as their targets. They described these victims as “retarded,” “stupid,” “quiet,” “lamb-like,” and “unable to fight back.” There are passive victims as well as provocative victims. The respondents gave the impression that being passive or stupid justified their being victimized. Ronald was the only one who admitted that these were just excuses. He confessed: “Even if that guy is a decent chap, sometimes I will still hit him. I don’t know why.” To most others, discrediting the victims helped them to avoid feeling guilty.

How could an individual change from feeling for the victim to feeling proud of his own bullying behavior? Sam gave a good description of his own process of change:

Going with a gang gives you a chance to learn to bully others.
For the first two or three times, I was afraid. I was afraid that after beating people up, I would be beaten up in return. I also felt that the guy who was beaten up was really pitiable. So I just stood aside...
After some time, I no longer felt that way. I just feel they deserve it...
I don’t know why I had this change. I no longer feel scared having seen others’ bullying so often.

Sam claimed he did not know why he changed, but that he just learned to desensitize himself and then enjoy the benefits of the action. In the process, group support is definitely an encouraging factor, especially if the support comes from a Triad. Sam felt a sense of security when he joined a Triad and thus he slowly began to follow the group norms. This was a natural process. As Ronald said:

After seeing others extort money, I just followed their behavior. When I am with that group of people and I see they extort money from others, I just do the same.

That is typical group behavior. There is a diffusion of responsibility and one feels supported when following the group norms. After all,
many bullies enjoy that feeling of power, as mentioned above. A new image is established, giving them a sense of strength, status, and potency not attainable from school work or from home. Most of the respondents performed poorly in school and complained of being scolded and criticized by family members. But bullying others gives them a special status among the peers. This picture is consistent with the findings of Johnson and Lewis (1999) that bullies have a more positive self-concept in the social domain and higher self-esteem than the average student, though a poorer self-concept in the scholastic domain.

*Withdrawing Phase—Moving Away.* Of the eight bullies interviewed, two claimed that they had stopped bullying, three that they had reduced their bullying behavior, and three that they had no intention of changing their bullying behavior. What had caused such changes in five of the respondents? Teacher supervision was described as not being very effective as many victims would not report bullying incidents. But if these youngsters bullied others everyday or several times a week, they could not escape eventually being caught as someone would finally report them. If the teacher took action, the punishment often included informing the bully’s family about the incident. In more serious cases, the police would be contacted. So a number of inhibiting factors are linked together.

*Police intervention* seems to have a strong inhibiting effect. Charles described what pushed him to change:

> The teachers made me write down the [bullying] incident on a record form. I was asked what had happened. If the incident was serious, they would inform the police... I am very afraid of the police as they use physical punishment in secret. I am also afraid of being expelled from school. I don’t want my family to worry.

Ronald described more clearly the kind of physical punishment used by the police:

> In Form One, I extorted money from classmates. When I was sent to see the anti-Triad squad, they asked me to assume the position of sitting on an imaginary chair, slapped me, pushed me against the wall, and kept hitting me.

Most of the respondents said they were afraid of seeing the police. Besides the corporal punishment they would receive, they were afraid of being prosecuted. Even if they did not stop their bullying
behavior totally when the police became involved, they would minimize such behavior. Such a response only occurred when they were investigated by the police.

According to behaviorist theory, pure punishment is not the most effective means of control. It is when one's needs are satisfied by other means that the motivation to recommit the original behavior is stopped. In the case of bullying, the gains in power, status, benefits, and so on, satisfy the needs of the bullies. Charles' parents successfully changed his bullying behavior by providing alternatives for him. Charles described the process:

I suffered no consequences initially when I extorted money. But as I began to do it every month, then everyday, I started to face the consequences. The school asked to see my parents, I was given demerits, and I had to see the principal. My family members reviewed the situation with me patiently. They told me that if I didn't have money, they would give me some. And they really did. The classmate reported [my bullying] to the teacher. I was angry and wanted to beat him up. But when I told my sister about it, she asked me not to be so impulsive as I was the one who had started it. So I did not take revenge.

His family's acceptance, explanation, material support, and concern were effective in helping Charles to change. Some of the other respondents also had parents who advised them to change, but the effect was not so apparent. The difference could lie in the provision of alternatives—an alternative way to satisfy the respondents' material needs, and also, an alternative positive bond and attachment. As Charles said:

I have good relations with my family. We have meals and go on outings together. I would help my family members with household chores, play chess with my father. My family members are not rigid, would not get angry with me easily.

Charles' family was able to give him a strong sense of belonging, warmth, and positive attention. His misbehavior did not lead to any distance growing between him and his family. Rather, it made them feel even more concerned about him. He no longer needed to rely on his gang for support or to extort money. Appropriate action taken by his family and his awareness of other possible consequences, such as expulsion or prosecution, combined to have a great impact on him, leading him to change.
The Dynamics of the Multiple Factors of Bullying. Bullying is a product of multiple factors: exposure to bullying behavior, the need for security and identity, the need for an emotional outlet, the attraction of benefits, the opportunity to belong to a group of bullies, reinforcement and establishment of the bully identity, the weak inhibition effect in the school environment, and strong subcultural influences of the Triads. A review of the process of becoming a bully shows that at different stages, the respondents were subject to different stimulations and made different responses. Modeling of bullying behavior did not start right away. It was their sense of insecurity and the chance to join a group of bullies that led them to reconsider their position, and a shift of identification then occurred. The more incidents of bullying there were in the school, the greater was the sense of insecurity among non-bullies and the weaker was the students' trust in teacher protection. This led to a greater enticement to join a group of bullies. It is a vicious circle. The rewards of bullying reinforce the behavior and gang membership, and gang membership also encourages more bullying behavior. When youngsters identify themselves as gang members and bullies, they psychologically justify their behavior by claiming that the victims deserve to be bullied. They become insensitive to the brutality inherent in their actions. Perpetuation or termination of the bullying behavior would depend on the relative force of the reinforcing or inhibiting factors. Using an ecological framework, we can see that the influencing factors come from all levels. At the macrosystem level are the Triad activity in the neighborhood and the school environment. At the mesosystem level are the teacher–student, family, and peer relationships. At the microsystem level, are the person's moral standard, desires, habits, and emotional state. The interplay of the different factors at each phase is shown in Figure 1.

Implications for Practice

The problem of bullying is often treated by teachers as an individual student's behavior problem in schools. But from this process analysis, we can see that the problem is much more complex and therefore requires intervention at multiple levels. A number of actions are suggested below based on the findings of this study.
FIGURE 1. A process model of bullying behavior.
Control of Triad activities, Especially in School Neighborhoods

As Triad gangs’ recruitment of members and some bullying activities are conducted outside school campuses, more police patrols are necessary to ensure secure neighborhoods. Some studies have reported that bystanders’ passive watching of bullying incidents actually reinforces the behavior of bullies (O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Frequent police patrols near to schools and the establishment of a friendly relationship between police and residents would help to encourage the reporting of bullying activities.

Provision of a Non-aggressive, Nurturing School Environment

Many principals have overlooked the influence of informal group norms and the subculture of schools. The fact that students feel it is safer to be bullies than to be bullied is distressing. Teachers, school social workers, and janitors must all be alerted to the problem. They should be trained to identify unusual student behavior or appearance. For example, if a student emerges from a toilet with a very untidy uniform and a distressed face, he may have just been bullied. There should be closer surveillance by teachers at recess and hidden spots on campus should be checked by janitors. If the problem is serious, police help should be solicited to restore a sense of security in the non-bullying community.

As a means of primary prevention, we should consider inculcating non-violent values in students’ minds. Campaigns like Project Peace, which teaches students to be against the use of violence (de Anda, 1999), or the Kindness Campaign, which promotes the humanistic values of respect for the law and tolerance of difference (Weinhold, 1996), are examples of ways to promote an anti-bullying atmosphere in schools. The provision of more extra-curricular activities is also beneficial to both bullies and their victims. Such activities allow youngsters to expend their energy and provide more appropriate ways of gaining status and power, and having fun. Potential victims would also have more opportunities to build a support network.

Work toward Constructive Change Instead of Carrying out Pure Discipline

It was evident from the interviews that only using punishment as a way of controlling bullying behavior is not effective. There should be
a careful exploration of how incidents of bullying occur, to determine whether they are genuine conflicts or bullying. Positive mediation may reduce the possibility of bullies’ further seeking revenge against a victim after being reported on. Working with a bully’s family to enhance their support for his development of a positive identity may be a more effective way of curbing the bullying behavior. The common practice of just summoning parents to school and complaining about the child’s behavior is not helpful. Most parents disapprove of bullying behavior, but they may not be able to master the socio-psychological dynamics involved. Their reproaches and accusations may only further strengthen a bully’s bond with his gang. The teacher, the school social worker, and the parents must follow up on the case together.

The Social Worker as an Initiator, Resource Person, and Team Member

While collaborative effort is essential to bring about any significant change, school social workers have a very significant role to play. Principals and teachers often concentrate on students’ academic performance and assume bullying to be an individual problem. Social workers are more sensitive to the holistic analysis of problems and have a more generic perspective in planning interventions. School social workers have to encourage the school authorities to play a more proactive role and implement collaborative action. Research on the bullying situation within the school could be conducted to show the principal and the teachers the extent of the problem. As more and more news items about bullying appear in the press, it should be more easy to persuade principals to take preventive measures such as launching human concern and non-violent value movements in schools. Social workers could also work as resource persons, inviting experts in the field to organize workshops on handling bullying behavior for teachers. Police officers could be invited to schools to remind students of the legal consequences of using violence. A special working group could be formed with the senior teachers to devise practical guidelines for teachers on handling bullying incidents. Of course, on the micro practice level, social workers have to really look at the needs of bullies and their victims, and solicit support from their families to help them discard such roles.
Conclusion

Adolescence is a stage of life that is full of possibilities. In their attempt to build their identity and faced with threatening situations, adolescents may choose the wrong action. The escalation of bullying behavior in schools is a strong indication that it is high time more attention was paid to the problem. The present study has reviewed the process of change that adolescents go through to become bullies, and the different factors pushing and pulling them to remain bullies or to quit. The implications for intervention have been identified. The data come from experiences recounted by bullies in Hong Kong. The factors identified in this study may or may not be found in studies conducted in other countries. Similar research on bullies would definitely help to reveal the dynamics of the problem in different contexts. With a better understanding of what our youngsters go through, hopefully we can curb abusive behavior in schools and restore the school campus to the safe nurturing ground it should be.

References

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