

## 4 Developing an integrated, systemic model of school bullying

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The initial impetus for the programme of research discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 came from clinical work with families of children who are deaf. The central question was, ‘Why are some deaf children bullied and what are the implications for intervention?’ In deciding what research to undertake, an important factor was the contention by the specialist psychotherapist Harvey (1989) that the behaviour and experience of children who are deaf is highly influenced by the powerful systems that encapsulate them (family, professionals, peers and so forth). However, whilst this is particularly true of children who are deaf, it is a principle that applies to all children. One aim of the research was to identify which parts of the deaf child’s system are relevant in the development and management of bullying. Another was to map how these parts might interact with one another to exacerbate or reduce bullying. To this end, two studies were undertaken: a case study of a secondary, mainstream school (Chapter 2) and a retrospective study with adults who were deaf or hearing impaired (Chapter 3). The case study identified the ways in which bullying and the management of bullying are embedded within the overall network of relationships that is a school. The retrospective study sampled the breadth of experiences and range of influences on deaf children’s peer relationships, identifying some common patterns across the range of school settings. From these two studies it was possible to develop a meta-perspective of one school system and to identify three group processes that have the potential to produce bullying behaviours in any group.

This chapter charts the way in which the findings from these two studies formed the basis for further theory building. The final result was a broad, systemic framework of school bullying. At present this incorporates a total of seven levels of the system that have particular impact on the development and management of bullying. These include the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ person; the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ one-to-one relationship; the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ group; and the school as a whole. The first half of this chapter describes how a systemic approach

to research allowed the detail of the school system to be mapped. The second half describes how systemic thinking was used to identify the other six levels of the system particularly pertinent to the genesis and management of school bullying. The aim is to demonstrate how systemic thinking may be used to guide research and theory building, and to introduce the basic framework of an integrated, systemic model of bullying which may support research, theory building and practice in schools.

### **The use of systemic thinking in research**

Systemic thinking is a loose body of ideas and techniques, organised around the principle that each system is both complete in its own right but also part of a larger system. Beyond this, each systemic practitioner or researcher will have their own version of which concepts are most important (Campbell *et al.*, 1994). What they share is the desire to understand the overall web of connections – the way in which each part of the system influences and is influenced by other parts of the system. In general, systemic thinking is more likely to be used as a framework to inform clinical practice (for example, Barlow and Durand, 2008; Sarafino, 2008) than as a framework for research. Nonetheless, the defining question in systemic research is the same as in clinical practice: how and why does this system function as it does (Patton, 1990)? A range of qualitative or quantitative methodologies may be employed to establish how a system is functioning. However systemic thinking is not an explanatory theory and so it does not answer the question of why a system functions in a particular way. The beauty and flexibility of this approach is that theory may be drawn from a range of sources to explain the patterns that emerge (Tomm, 1984a).

It is not uncommon to find systemic thinking being used to describe, understand and intervene in schools (for example, Sarason, 1996), especially in relation to emotional and behavioural problems (for example, Thompson and Sharp, 1994). However, although the relevance of the systemic perspective is increasingly recognised in relation to bullying – especially by practitioners (for example, Tyler, 1998) – it is rarely used as a framework for research in this field. To date, research into bullying has focused on assessing types and levels of bullying, and on identifying the various factors involved in its development and management. Causes of bullying have been sought in the family (for example, Eslea and Smith, 2000; Smith and Myron-Wilson, 1998), the peer group (for example, Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996a) and in the individual children who become bullies (for example, Sutton *et al.*, 1999) or victims (for example,

Salmivalli *et al.*, 1999). Features of the school which might contribute to bullying have been debated in the research literature (for example, O'Moore *et al.*, 1997; Roland and Munthe, 1997). Teachers' ability to identify and manage bullying (for example, Roland, 2000; Schafer and Smith, 1996, respectively) has also been explored. However, these factors tend to be studied largely in isolation from one another. Systemic thinking provides a framework within which the relationships between these parts might gradually be conceptualised.

*Combining systemic thinking with a qualitative methodology*

As the studies in this programme of research were exploratory, the data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Consequently, it was necessary to find a research framework that would ensure data collection and analysis was methodical and consistent, and that would provide a clear audit trail. One qualitative methodology that seemed to have a lot in common with systemic thinking was grounded theory (see Pidgeon and Henwood, 1996). Both are based on a constructivist epistemology; both use ongoing hypothesis generation and testing to find possible connections in the data; and both emphasise the need to recognise and manage the subjectivity of practitioner or researcher. Systemic thinking and grounded theory also have complementary strengths.

*Questions that help reveal patterns in interactions*

Interviews within grounded theory can be described as directed conversations. In this respect they have a lot in common with the systemic interviews that occur in clinical practice. However, systemic thinking provides a form of questioning that actively generates detailed information about the range of perspectives within a system, their relationship to one another and recursive cycles of interaction (see Tomm, 1984b). For example, 'circular questions' (Tomm, 1988) are founded upon the assumption of circular causality. One example would be 'behavioural effect questions', which ask how each person's behaviour impacts on subsequent events. If the question 'What happened then?' is asked skilfully enough, recursive cycles of behaviour become apparent. These questions don't demand explanations for other people's feelings and intentions – information the participant may not have. Consequently, they are not challenging but should instead be conversational and stimulating. 'Triadic questions' also put the participant in the role of reporting on the relationship between other people by inviting speculation about their feelings and intentions. These are useful because

the person observing a relationship is less likely to ‘manage’ information than those directly involved. For example, they are less likely to attribute good intentions where there are none. Furthermore, speculation is relatively easy – there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer. However, this form of questioning was developed for use in clinical settings and consequently care has to be taken when using it in a research context. Questions that might strike research participants as strange need to be identified during piloting. For example, ‘reflexive questions’ (Tomm, 1987) are based on the assumption that systems have the capacity to ‘heal’ or correct themselves and that members of a system know what is required for change to occur. One type of reflexive question is the ‘hypothetical question’. Here one might ask, ‘Who in this school seems most concerned about bullying?’ and ‘Who seems least concerned?’, hoping to reveal where there is leverage for change in a system or why change has not occurred. However, during piloting this type of question seemed to unsettle participants and was dropped from interview schedules.

#### *Capturing the details in participants’ accounts*

A second way in which grounded theory and systemic thinking complement one another is that grounded theory provides strategies with which to unpack data and ensure that each account is accurately encapsulated in the early coding. Later in the analysis, systemic thinking provides the tools with which to find connections between the various parts of the data: it is particularly helpful for identifying structures and processes across a number of accounts. At this point, grounded theory provides strategies for structuring and recording the analysis.

Analysis in this programme of research began with the data from the school study, continued with the retrospective study, and in the final stages of theory building moved between the two studies. In practice, once the interviews had been transcribed, all data underwent an initial grounded analysis to capture as accurately as possible each participant’s account. This part of the analysis was reflected in the early coding (‘grounded codes’). These codes were first sorted according to themes and other connections that emerged from the data (Charmaz, 1995). Groups or networks of grounded codes were encapsulated in ‘research codes’. ‘Research categories’ encapsulated discrete parts of the findings relating to core processes or themes identified in the analysis. Wherever possible, hypotheses about structures and processes were tested in a return to the data.

*The use of systemic constructs to identify local structures and processes*

Systemic constructs were subsequently employed to generate hypotheses about 'local' structures and processes at different levels of the system (the school system, subgroups within the school, dyadic relationships and the individual). An extended example of the use of the systemic construct of boundaries can be found in Chapter 3.

There has been debate about the extent to which themes emerge naturally from the data during a grounded analysis versus the extent to which analysis is an inherently subjective process. The approach described here knowingly imposed systemic constructs and principles on the data in the latter half of the analysis and is therefore a hybrid approach.

*The use of systemic principles to make connections within the data*

Hypothesising, circular causality and neutrality were the principles used by an influential group of Italian family therapists known as the 'Milan group' (for example, Selvini-Palazzoli *et al.*, 1980). Their aim was to develop conceptual maps of the systems with which they were working, focusing on the question of how each person's perspective interacts with and is shaped by other perspectives within that system. These three principles were important in developing the meta-perspective in the school study, and in making links across the data in the two studies. The additional principle of isomorphy was profoundly important in developing an understanding of the other levels of the system (the individual, the dyad and the group).

As a result of using these four systemic principles it was possible to produce a systemic framework within which bullying can be construed. This model highlights systemic structures, processes and inter-relationships that have not previously been discussed in such detail in the context of bullying.

*Making sense of the school system* To demonstrate how the principles of hypothesising, circular causality and neutrality were used in practice, an extended example is given that incorporates all three, beginning with hypothesising.

*Hypothesising* From a systemic perspective, hypothesising is a 'conceptual activity' for generating alternative 'maps' and explanations of the processes within a system (Tomm, 1984a). Hypotheses generate questions that can be asked of the research data or further participants

in order to elicit information that could confirm or refute a supposition under consideration.

For example, during the analysis of the school study, it became apparent that there were two contradictory accounts from participants of the difficulties experienced by students who were hearing impaired. On the one hand, the specialist staff described the hearing impaired students as egocentric and oversensitive. Consequently, they believed the hearing impaired students caused many of their own problems. On the other hand, the students (hearing impaired and hearing) and mainstream staff reported that the hearing impaired students were perceived as different and consequently were more likely than peers to be treated as second-class citizens, to be socially excluded or marginalised and to be kept in a 'one-down' position. Given that these two accounts were contradictory, the implication seemed to be that only one was incorrect. Initially, the account from students and mainstream staff was accepted and the other rejected. The hypothesis developed was that the hearing impaired children were in danger of being stigmatised.

However, from a systemic perspective, the beliefs held by the specialist staff must have served some function within the system and therefore it was important to understand what shaped these beliefs, what sustained them and what effect they had on other parts of the system. Eventually, specific details in the data resulted in the conclusion that a *subgroup* of hearing impaired students potentially fitted the staff's account. The hypothesis developed was that this subgroup was struggling with the lasting effects of early language delay. Consequently, these students may have found it difficult to perceive realities other than their own – which may have made them seem 'egocentric'. Furthermore, they may have been particularly open to the effects of other children's behaviour and this may have made them seem 'oversensitive' (see p. 52 for a fuller explanation).

A return to the data to test both the initial and then the additional hypothesis made it possible to accept both the account from the students and mainstream staff *and* the account from the specialist staff. What became apparent was that the hearing impaired children were, of course, not a homogenous group. Consequently, the 'stigmatisation hypothesis' was found to be relevant to all hearing impaired students, whilst the 'early language delay hypothesis' was only relevant to a subgroup of hearing impaired students.

So the two accounts had been describing different parts of the larger picture: the students and mainstream staff had been focusing on the potentially attacking behaviour of the hearing students, while the specialist staff had been focusing on the particular vulnerability of some hearing impaired students. The first 'map' of the interactions in this

system covered only part of the overall territory, whilst the final map covered both. Alternative hypotheses were useful in guiding the search for further information that in the end resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of the overall system.

*Circular causality* Thinking in terms of circular causality can be particularly useful in breaking the culture of blame that can be the product of more linear thinking. Understanding how a particular behaviour has come to be understood as a stimulus rather than as a response can provide useful information about how a school is functioning (Dowling and Osborne, 1985). However, it is probably most useful to think of circular and linear causality as complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Tomm, 1984a). 'A' may cause 'B' (linear causality); 'B' may cause 'A' (linear causality); and 'A' may cause 'B' – which, in turn, causes 'A' (circular causality). All three conceptualisations of an interaction may be helpful in understanding processes within a system and bringing about change within that system.

Taking up the example from the school study once again, the specialist staff had made a choice about the part of the system upon which they focused their attention. From a systemic perspective, it was important to understand why they focused on the apparently egocentric and over-sensitive behaviour of a subgroup of hearing impaired students rather than on the marginalising and disempowering behaviour of some hearing students. In short, the specialist staff focused on what they saw as the 'deficits' of the hearing impaired students because they had greater power to change these students than they had to change the attitudes and behaviours of the majority, hearing group. They also believed it would be of more benefit in the long term to enable the hearing impaired students to cope in the potentially stigmatising school environment—which was similar to the environment they would face on leaving school—than it would be to change the school environment. Third, this approach located 'the problem' with the hearing impaired students and therefore kept its management largely contained within the specialist unit rather than requiring changes throughout the school as a whole. The management system rewarded the specialist staff for containing the problem in this way by allowing them greater professional autonomy than their mainstream colleagues. This was of benefit to both the specialist staff and to a large extent the hearing impaired students. The mainstream staff also benefited from being able to delegate responsibility for 'the problem' to the specialist staff. Consequently, they also behaved in ways that maintained the status quo – for example, acting as if the specialist staff had almost magical powers to manage the needs of the hearing

impaired students. Overall, the analysis suggested that the approach employed by the specialist staff was very much sustained by a web of interconnecting beliefs and behaviours that involved all parts of the school system (see Figure 2.3, p. 64). So, looking for circular patterns of interaction made it possible to understand what sustained the staff's approach to the problem, even though their approach was only partially successful.

*Neutrality* Understanding a specific behaviour as both a stimulus *and* a response requires neutrality in the observer. Until that neutrality is achieved, the researcher sees the data through the filter of their own beliefs and needs; through the beliefs and needs of the professional systems of which they are a part; and indeed through the beliefs and needs of the system under observation. Not surprisingly, neutrality is difficult to achieve. The best we can do is to ensure we subsume ourselves within the perspective of each participant or group in turn, rather than taking the perspective of only one person or one group in a system (Tomm, 1984a).

The specialist staff construed the hearing impaired students' apparently egocentric and oversensitive behaviour as a stimulus for the hearing students' behaviour, rather than as a response. One factor that led me, as the researcher, to reject their account of the students' difficulties was my previous involvement with the Deaf community. The description given by the specialist staff was highly contentious. In the past, characterisations of people who are deaf as egocentric have been associated with the view of deaf people as inherently emotionally limited – a view that has been forcefully rejected (for example, Kitson, 1990). So it was only when the staff's repeated juxtapositioning of the terms 'egocentric' and 'oversensitive' began to signal something specific about some students' psychological functioning that it became possible for me to stop reacting negatively to the way in which the staff were expressing themselves and to see the potential significance of their account.

In addition to the beliefs and attitudes I brought with me and imposed upon the data, my role as a researcher may have affected the way in which I punctuated the data with meaning. For example, Berne (1961) described a triangular pattern of relating in which individuals or groups each assume one of three roles: that of victim, persecutor or rescuer. These roles will be swapped from time to time, with the victim becoming persecutor or bully and so forth. Hawkins and Shohet (1989) have used this construct to make sense of relationships within professional groups and it may also be relevant here. The picture of

bullying in this school was complex and subtle: on the one hand, only a few children seemed to experience severe bullying but, on the other hand, most of the hearing impaired students experienced some level of social difficulty. By focusing on the attacking behaviour of the hearing students and overlooking the way in which some hearing impaired students might sometimes be inadvertently exacerbating the problem, I was in danger of portraying the hearing students as persecutors and the hearing impaired students as victims. In the early stages of the analysis, I also construed the specialist staff as persecutory because they seemed to be discounting the difficulties their students faced and labelling them as deficient. Identifying a new group of persecutors and victims potentially put me, the researcher, in the role of rescuer. This would have been to my benefit if for example it had attracted funding for further research. The danger is that *I* could also have become a *persecutor* by labelling the staff as ‘incompetent’ and uncaring.

However, by the end of the analysis what had become clear was that the beliefs and behaviours of the specialist staff were shaped by their implicit understanding of the problems their students faced; the explicit and also implicit functions they had been given by the school; and by the constraints upon them as they carried out the roles they had been given. In other words, they were a product of the system in which they worked – although, of course, their actions also had an impact on the rest of the system. The usefulness of the systemic approach was that it helped me to step out of all three roles – victim, persecutor and rescuer – and instead to assume the role of neutral observer.

In the past, the systemic perspective has been criticised for the emphasis placed on neutrality in the observer. The concern has been that, if all behaviour is understood in terms of the function it serves, this approach will simply support the status quo (Bailey, 1990). It is now more widely accepted that the systemic perspective allows us to see how all the members of a system can become caught in recursive patterns of interaction. This calls for compassion rather than condemnation (Tomm, 1984a). Understanding a system in this way can be the precursor to an intervention tailored much more specifically to the needs of the various subsystems within a school. Separating the process of understanding from the activity of intervening may in itself be a useful strategy that allows the researcher to ponder the meaning of seemingly ‘unacceptable perspectives’ and to take time to make sense of their relevance.

The point will be made in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 that the understanding developed by practitioners in the course of their work represents an important starting place for formal theory building. However, as this case study demonstrates, it can be difficult to make explicit precisely

how practitioners are making sense of the problems they face. Indeed, this may have to be deduced in large part from their practice. This may be because the problems they are managing are so multifaceted. As this case study shows, staff are likely to be simultaneously addressing the multiple needs of a range of people within highly complex social systems.

So the value of the systemic approach is that it supports the process of building detailed pictures of complex systems. Each system has its own unique pattern of relationships and consequently effective intervention needs to be linked to a proper understanding of and respect for the particular goals, dilemmas and relationships within each school.

### **From describing to explaining**

As mentioned earlier, systemic thinking is not an explanatory theory. To explain the patterns that became apparent during the analysis, explanatory theory has to be drawn from a wide range of sources. One example of this can be seen where the theory of stigmatisation was used to explain a pattern of relating between the mainstream and unit students in the school study. Another example can be seen where the theories 'ostracism' and 'scapegoating' were used to explain some of the rejecting and attacking behaviours reported by participants in the retrospective study.

#### *Making sense of group processes*

The discussion of ostracism and scapegoating in Chapter 3 highlighted that, whilst these two processes both potentially involve rejecting and attacking behaviour, the theoretical distinction between them is clear. One fundamental difference is that one can be regarded as a largely conscious process – or one of which the individuals involved may be made aware – whilst the other is regarded as a largely unconscious process. For example, quotes from participants who seemed to have been ostracised suggested that those involved had been aware of the effects of the attacking and rejecting behaviour. The formalised use of ostracism in schools and homes also suggests that the process and effects of ostracism are understood by the actors involved. In contrast, participants who seemed to have been the subject of scapegoating were often left confused about what had happened to them.

However, whilst it is important to be able to say how these processes differ, it is also important to understand the relationship between them. This is necessary for both academic rigour and for those trying to manage bullying. Unfortunately, this represented something of

a conceptual puzzle. However, having explored this problem for some time, one way forward was found in Agazarian and Peters' (1981) systemic model of the 'visible and invisible group'. This is based on the assumption that groups have two *simultaneous* levels of functioning. On the one hand, the group can be understood as a collection of individuals, each of whom operates and interacts as a system in their own right. On the other hand, the group can also be construed as a single system in which group members lose their individuality and function as subsystems of the larger group system. When the group is operating as a collection of individuals, group members can be made aware of the processes involved. For this reason it is referred to as the 'visible group'. When the group is functioning as a single system, the processes involved operate largely outside the awareness of individual group members. Consequently, the term the 'invisible group' has been coined to reflect this level of functioning.<sup>1</sup>

Agazarian and Peters (1981) suggest that, when thinking about the group that is a collection of individuals – the visible group – one's attention will be on the behaviour of the individual group members. At this level of analysis, the group is considered to be *equal to or greater than the sum of its parts*. Observations of individuals can be generalised and developed into theories about how groups work and how individuals function within groups. Therefore, theories from social and personality psychology built by inductive methods can be applied to understanding this level of group functioning. In contrast, the invisible group is considered *different to the sum of its parts* because it is functioning as a system in its own right. To understand this level of group functioning one uses deductive reasoning and deductive theories, for example psychoanalytic theories of social and personality psychology.

*Are two levels of group functioning apparent in previous research on bullying?* Previous research into school bullying that occurs in groups (for example, Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996a) is usually rooted in the tradition of inductive research methods and inductive reasoning, and indeed the assumption seems to have been that the group is a 'collection of individuals' who may be made aware of the processes involved. Schuster's (1999) work is unusual in that she fleetingly considered the possibility of scapegoating as described by Lyndon (1994) as a potential explanation for her data, although she did not talk explicitly about two simultaneous

<sup>1</sup> The unconscious level of functioning is different to the 'implicit' roles and rewards discussed in the school study in Chapter 1. In other words, in addition to unconscious processes, there may be some aspects of some relationships which are not explicitly discussed but which nonetheless are available to the awareness of those involved.

levels of group functioning. Pikas (1975) may be the person whose work comes closest to talking in terms of an unconscious level of functioning in which individuals operate as subsystems of the larger group system. For example, he talked about re-individualising group members from the collective mind during mobbing. He explained how, when one starts to treat mobbing, what becomes apparent is that the thoughts and feelings of the group are simpler than those of any of its individual members. Indeed, he described the collective mind as relatively simple and the behaviour of the group as predictable. Consequently, the priority for treatment was to 're-individualise' group members. This could be done by talking to the members of the group separately and making their fears and reservations about their own behaviour conscious.

*Implications for theory building and practice with groups* The strength of Agazarian and Peters' (1981) model is that it makes explicit the parameters of these two levels of functioning. This makes it possible to establish at which of these two levels a specific process is likely to be operating. Consequently, it offers one way of understanding the relationship between ostracism and scapegoating: ostracism is a group process in which group members relate as a collection of individuals, whilst scapegoating is a group process in which group members relate as subsystems serving the needs of a larger system. One important implication is that ostracism and scapegoating are only two aspects of group development and group maintenance. Other processes will be involved and some of these may also result in behaviours that could be experienced as bullying.

Thinking about group processes in this way has profound implications for both research and intervention. For example, the intervention that would be needed when group members are profoundly unaware of the process involved will be qualitatively different to that required when the individuals can explicitly discuss their behaviour and motivation. In practice, the methods used in empirical studies need to be sensitive to the possibility that some processes may be largely unavailable to the conscious awareness of the individuals involved. Identifying when these processes are at work may be a more deductive process.

Whilst the literature on school bullying does include discussion of group dynamics, much of the focus is on individual risks (for example, Mahdavi and Smith, 2007). The role of unconscious group processes has been particularly neglected. In part, this is probably because bullying tends to be defined in terms of intentional behaviour. In practice, this aspect of the definition is difficult to operationalise. It is likely that some – if not much – of the behaviour categorised as bullying is

motivated by unconscious processes (however these are construed). Indeed, it may be time to seriously reconsider the basic assumption that bullying behaviour is intentional.

It is likely that clues could be found in a broad spectrum of literature about additional group processes that may generate bullying behaviour – literature ranging from ethology to sociology, social psychology, psychoanalysis and beyond. Fortunately this model is flexible enough to house theory drawn from across disciplinary and paradigmatic boundaries.

As the various processes that may generate bullying behaviour in groups become apparent, the relationship between them needs to be considered if a truly integrated account of bullying is to be developed. For example, in Chapter 2 it became possible to conclude that Nesdale's (2007) work on Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT) offers a useful explanation of students' tendency to conform to group norms and to vie with one another for status. It also provides an account of the conditions under which this behaviour might include aggression against members of out-groups. For example, such aggression enhances the identity and self-esteem of the individual, and also the cohesion of the group. The work by Owens *et al.* (2000) adds further detail on the function of indirect aggression in groups of teenage girls. Indeed, this behaviour seems to perform similar functions of regulating group membership, and increasing intimacy and position within the group. However, here the process – and the form the behaviours take – is very much shaped by the developmental stage and gender of the students involved. The theory of stigmatisation potentially adds still further detail about the function of aggression towards children with disabilities. Again, this seems to perform a similar function of clarifying group boundaries and increasing group cohesion, but it is targeted very specifically at students with some form of 'discrediting mark' and may only occur under certain conditions. The theory of ostracism potentially adds further detail about reactions to children who break group norms. This theory does not contradict SIDT or the work on teenage girls or the work on stigmatisation. Instead, it focuses more specifically on the potential role that conformity plays in stabilising and protecting group functioning. The theory of scapegoating does not contradict any of these theories either but instead provides an account of a further cause of bullying behaviour in groups. It is an account of a qualitatively different type of process that may simultaneously be at work within the peer group. One might understand the work on participant roles by Salmivalli *et al.* (1996a) in terms of the *general tendency* each child has to behave in a particular way when group processes are at work. And

so forth. To reiterate, this is not an exhaustive account of the processes that may generate bullying behaviour in groups. Furthermore, none of the group processes discussed explain all cases of bullying and none will necessarily be active all the time or in all groups.

What becomes apparent is that, in order to develop a coherent, integrated account of bullying, theory builders need to (a) differentiate between the group processes that may produce bullying behaviour and (b) clarify the relationship between them. Establishing whether a process is one in which individuals relate to one another as whole systems or as subsystems of the larger group could help locate it at the most appropriate level of the system. To this end, it may also be useful to establish whether or not it is a process of which the children involved are aware. Identifying the function a process serves will help clarify its relationship to the other processes at that particular level of the system. It may therefore be useful to consider whether the process theoretically serves a purpose in the development or maintenance of the group – or whether it is a more pathological process (perhaps with roots in one of the developmental or maintenance processes).

### **A fourth principle: isomorphy**

#### *Making sense of dyadic relationships*

Construing the group as having two simultaneous but qualitatively different levels of functioning has implications for theory building beyond the realms of the peer group. It raises the question of whether other levels of the system – in particular the individual and the dyadic relationship – should also be construed as having both conscious and unconscious levels of functioning. If they do, is it possible that developmental or maintenance processes at these levels of the system might also be implicated in bullying behaviour? Indeed, the fourth principle employed in the later stages of building this model of bullying was that of ‘isomorphy’. This is the principle that what is learnt about one level of the system may be applied to other levels of the system if the specific nature of each level is taken into account (Dallos, 1991).

*The bully–victim dyad* Starting with dyadic relationships, the question was whether bully–victim relationships that involve two people should be construed as having two simultaneous levels of functioning. If this were the case, one would be a largely conscious level of processing that might be referred to as the ‘visible one-to-one relationship’. The other would be a largely unconscious level

of processing that might be referred to as the ‘invisible one-to-one relationship’. At the conscious level of processing, the individuals involved would relate as two complete systems. At the unconscious level, they would relate as subsystems of a larger two-person system. Extrapolating from Agarzarian and Peter’s (1981) model, relationships and processes within the *visible* one-to-one relationship would be concerned with explicit problems in the external world (for example, battles over practical resources). Theories that could be used to understand these relationships and processes would be those which construe one-to-one relationships as two whole systems in interaction – for example, theories found in mainstream social and personality psychology. In contrast, relationships and processes within the *invisible* one-to-one relationship would be concerned with problems that exist in the unconscious, internal world of the two people involved. The two individuals would adopt unconscious roles that together would result in a system composed of two parts that function as a whole. Theories that could be used to understand the invisible one-to-one relationship would be those in which individuals can be construed as parts, for example object relations theory.

*The visible one-to-one relationship* To explore the hypothesis that there may be two simultaneous levels of functioning within dyadic relationships – one conscious, the other largely unconscious – the findings of the two studies were re-examined. Bully–victim relationships had frequently been described by participants in terms of instrumental aggression. In other words, bullies were often described as coercing victims to gain explicit benefits for themselves. These benefits might include social benefits (such as improved position in the social hierarchy), psychological benefits (such as a conscious feeling of one-upmanship), material benefits (such as money) or pragmatic benefits (such as getting someone to do something for them, for example their homework). The transactions involved in these situations were transparent and explicitly described in interviews. Consequently, this part of the analysis seemed to be describing a visible one-to-one relationship in which children were relating to one another at a largely conscious level and as two complete systems. It was therefore concluded that instrumental aggression could be one source of bullying in the visible one-to-one relationship. Such aggression results in explicit benefits to the bully in their external world and/or at the conscious level of their psychological system. However, the assumption is that other aspects of visible one-to-one relationships are also likely to generate bullying behaviours.

*The invisible one-to-one relationship* More difficult to find were examples of an invisible one-to-one relationship. Transactions in which the bully and victim could be construed as subsystems of a two-person system or in which the one-to-one relationship could be understood as unconscious were rarely evident. This is not surprising given that information about this level of relating would have to be deducted. It would probably be necessary to gather more detailed data specifically about dyadic, bully–victim relationships. Nonetheless, there is an argument to be made for accepting that the invisible one-to-one relationship may play a role in *some* cases of bullying. For example, the literature on school bullying tends to understand bullying as proactive rather than reactive aggression (Dodge and Coie, 1987). Proactive aggression is further divided into instrumental aggression, in which some external goal is apparent, and bullying aggression, in which no goal can be observed to explain the bullying behaviour (Coie *et al.*, 1991). It *may* be that the difference between instrumental and bullying aggression is the difference between bullying generated by the visible and invisible levels of functioning.<sup>2</sup>

Bion's (1959) theory of the dyadic 'container–contained' relationship provides one theoretical example of the type of unconscious relationship that might generate bullying behaviour. To explain in brief, this theory suggests that the 'container–contained' relationship between mother and child is profoundly important in infancy. It serves the function of allowing mothers to make their infant's difficult feelings more manageable. Feelings such as anxiety and anger are potentially overwhelming for infants – so much so, that the infant must temporarily 'expel' and disown them. The suggestion is that the infant experiences this as projecting unwanted feelings into their mother. Once these feelings are perceived to belong to her, she seems contaminated and 'bad'. Nonetheless, the mother is able to make sense of the child's feelings and to give them a meaning that the infant is able to tolerate. In other words, she is able to think about the problem and do something appropriately soothing in response to her baby's distress. In so doing, she is experienced as 'good' once again. As the child matures, they become increasingly able to give their feelings a more palatable meaning for themselves. Eventually they should even become able to help others in this respect. Ideally, by adulthood, container–contained relationships are relatively equal,

<sup>2</sup> This distinction between instrumental and bullying aggression may be relevant to bullying within both dyads and groups.

with both partners helping the other to make sense of and to manage difficult experiences and feelings.

Unfortunately, this type of relationship may take a more pathological form. 'Parasitic' container-contained relationships are those in which one partner persistently but *unconsciously* imagines projecting their unwanted feelings into the other person. In their mind, these feelings or characteristics then belong to the other person. So, if they are jealous themselves, they perceive the other person as jealous. If they are anxious, they perceive the other person as anxious. And so forth. As a result, they devalue, denigrate and even attack the other person for apparently possessing these undesirable characteristics. The person making such projections could be described as an unwitting bully.

The parasitic container-contained relationship provides an example of a pathological form of a process that should support the development or maintenance of a system. This might be contrasted with processes such as scapegoating or ostracism, which potentially serve some function in meeting the overall needs of the system.<sup>3</sup>

To test the hypothesis that the parasitic container-contained relationship is one source of bullying, it may be possible to identify the constellation of behaviours and contextual factors that would be witnessed if this process were at work, and to assess whether these factors were evident in some cases of bullying in which two people are involved. The same process could be used to test the hypothesis that instrumental aggression is one source of bullying within the visible one-to-one relationship.

#### *Making sense of intrapsychic processes*

To recap, the principle of isomorphy suggests that what is learnt about one level of the system may be applied to understand other levels of the system, so long as the particular features of each level are taken into account. So, if it is fruitful to construe the group and the dyadic relationship as having two levels of functioning, it may also be useful to consider the role of unconscious as well as conscious processes

<sup>3</sup> It should be reiterated that the individual will experience scapegoating and ostracism as upsetting and even harmful, depending on the severity and duration of the behaviours involved. Furthermore, processes which *theoretically* serve a function in the development or maintenance of the group may be triggered when there is no real threat to the group (as in the case of ostracism) or may be unduly prolonged (as in the case of scapegoating). So, to say that a behaviour may serve some function in a relationship is not to condone that behaviour. However, understanding the goal of behaviour may provide greater leverage for lasting change.

*within* the individual. When thinking about the individual, it is important to remember that bullying is a relationship. Therefore one cannot be certain what role a particular child will play in bullying. Aspects of their personality may mean they have greater *potential* to play the role of victim or bully – but whether this potential is realised depends on the other children with whom they come into contact and the context of those relationships.

*The visible person* An example was given earlier of conscious, intrapsychic processes (p. 124). It was suggested that whether a child becomes a victim may depend on whether they have difficulty performing effective boundary-closing actions at a psychological level and whether they are therefore open to being manipulated into a permanent one-down position. Where the cognitions involved in boundary-closing actions are largely conscious – for example, in the form of explicit self-talk – this could be construed as a process operating at the level of the visible person.

*The invisible person* In the school study a composite description emerged of persistent bullies who were characterised as controlling, sadistic, abused/defensive and as having a tendency towards closed boundaries. The most comprehensive and coherent explanation for each aspect of this description of bullies can be found in object relations theory, as conceptualised by Klein (see, for example, Hinshelwood, 1989). The Kleinian model is not accepted here in its entirety. However, key principles relating to the structures and processes within the unconscious mind *during aggression* are useful because they resonate so clearly with this description of persistent bullies. Consequently, it is suggested that some bullying behaviour *may* be the result of a child's regression to the temporary use of unconscious defences – in particular, omnipotent thinking, splitting, projection, introjection, denial of interdependence, and controlling or dictatorial behaviour aimed at 'putting things right'. This might explain why so many children have the potential to revert to bullying behaviour from time to time. However, in a minority of cases, bullying may be the result of a personality that has come to be permanently structured around the use of these unconscious defences. Here, the child would be prone to more persistent bullying. It is worth reiterating that a child whose personality is structured around the use of these unconscious defences will not automatically become a bully. This will depend on the reaction of the children with whom they mix and the context of these interactions. Previous research has identified reactions to bullying behaviour that are likely to exacerbate

or reduce the occurrence of these behaviours (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996b). It would be useful to know more specifically which reactions are likely to reduce or increase the use of unconscious defensive behaviour.

A second example of processes located at the level of the invisible person was also found in the school study. Some of the children who were hearing impaired may have had a poorly consolidated sense-of-self-as-separate. This represents an aspect of their personality structure that would be operating outside conscious awareness and therefore can be construed as an aspect of the invisible person. These children may have been in danger of seeming egocentric because they found it difficult to empathise with alternative perspectives. Other children may experience such behaviour as provocative and sometimes even aggressive.

It is worth noting that, if a child has a poorly consolidated sense-of-self-as-separate (and so seems egocentric) but also has difficulty regulating the effects of other children's behaviour because they lack the necessary language skills (and so seems oversensitive), they might be characterised as a provocative-victim.

### Conclusion

Overall, the result of this work is an integrated, systemic model within which the various processes that may produce bullying can be conceptualised. A fundamental premise of this model is that, when an individual is part of a group or dyad, they will function both as a whole system in their own right and – *simultaneously* – as a subsystem of larger dyads or group systems. When operating as a system in their own right, the individual will be aware – or may be made aware – of the processes involved in the development and maintenance of those relationships. However, when operating as a subsystem, the processes involved are unconscious and the individual will not be aware of them. Construing some of the processes involved in bullying as unconscious could explain some types of bullying that have remained somewhat inexplicable. For example, it may explain the difference between 'instrumental aggression', for which an external goal is apparent, and 'bullying aggression', for which no external goal can be discerned.

Overall, this model details seven levels of the system that may be particularly relevant in the genesis and management of school bullying. These are the visible and invisible person; the visible and invisible one-to-one relationship; and the visible and invisible group and the school as a whole. The suggestion is that it is processes within groups or dyads that result in bullying behaviour. Some of these processes contribute to

the development or maintenance of that level of the system, while others are more pathological.

Factors at other levels of the system will have a profound impact upon the duration, intensity, form and impact that bullying behaviours take in each case. For example, the personality of the individual child will increase or decrease the likelihood of them behaving like a victim, a bully or some combination of both. A child who is unable to employ cognitions to reduce the upset they experience as a result of other children's behaviour and who increasingly believes they have no control over their interactions with another child *may* be particularly prone to becoming a victim. A child whose personality has come to be structured around the use of unconscious defences such as omnipotent thinking, splitting, projection, introjection, denial of interdependence, and controlling or dictatorial behaviour *may* be particularly prone to behaving like a bully. A child who – at an unconscious level – has a poorly consolidated sense-of-self-as-separate, and who also has difficulty employing cognitions to reduce the upset caused by other children's behaviour *may* be characterised as a provocative-victim. Some combination of these personality factors *may* also be relevant to children who are characterised as bully-victims. To be clear, these descriptions are offered as hypotheses that require further testing. Furthermore, it is assumed that more than one type of personality might lead a child to behave as a victim, a provocative victim, a bully-victim or a bully. The physical and social environment will also have a profound impact on how often a child's propensity to assume these roles is realised.

Figure 4.1 gives an overview of the model developed, including examples of relevant processes at each level of the system.

Interactions between individuals and between groups are regulated by the boundary actions of the systems involved. When trying to change patterns of interaction, it is profoundly important to address the role played by boundaries in establishing and maintaining relationships.

It is also important to note that an individual will be simultaneously operating at several different levels. For example, the child is both a visible and invisible person. If they are also a member of a group, they will operate as a complete system interacting with other individuals in that group, as well as a subsystem serving the needs of the larger system. They are likely to be a member of one or more dyadic relationships, as well as a member of one or more subgroups within the larger group – and so forth.

The school is an important system in this model. It is composed of numerous subgroups and is characterised by complex networks of relationships, established to meet the wide range of needs of a wide range

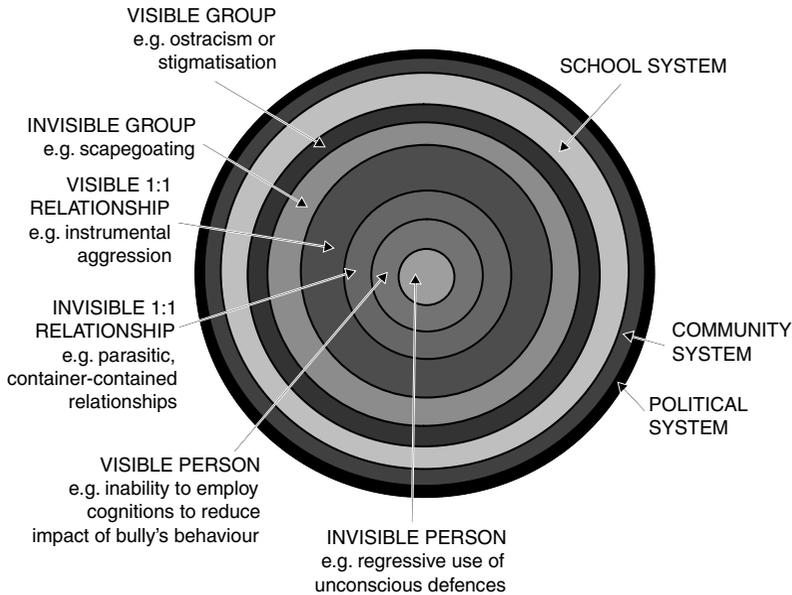


Figure 4.1 An integrated, systemic framework within which to conceptualise school bullying

of people (see Chapter 2 for an extended example). The analysis of the school study indicated that some subgroups within the school performed functions on behalf of the wider school system, some of which were explicit but others of which were more implicit. Some of these implicit functions – such as managing anxiety about whether the needs of the deaf students would be met – could be understood as unspoken agendas rather than unconscious processes. In other words, had they been asked, it is likely that staff and parents would have been aware of some of these unspoken agendas. This highlights an important distinction that needs to be made between roles and processes that are not explicitly named within a system but which could be discussed relatively easily, and roles and processes which are actually unconscious. The possibility of an unconscious level of functioning within the school was not specifically explored.

Parents form a group within the school which may simply be a collection of individuals or may be a loosely organised subsystem of the school, depending on the school. The influence of the family is also implicit at the level of the individual child. The family could be added as a discrete system within this model, in which case it too would be

construed as a group with two levels of functioning. Community and political systems are indicated in Figure 4.1 but have not been addressed in detail in this work although they do have a profound impact on the school.

Indeed, this model is not complete. Further detail can be added about a range of subsystems, levels, factors and processes (for example, see Espelage and Swearer, 2004). Further information is also likely to exist in other bodies of knowledge that are as yet underutilised by the field. For example, sociology, abnormal psychology, psychoanalytic psychology, systems theory and so forth may all have additional theory to contribute. To develop this model further, one possibility would be to glean from this literature which other processes may generate bullying behaviour, and to identify the behavioural and contextual indicators of each. These indicators could then be tested against data from schools. Another possibility would be to continue to identify patterns of behaviour and contextual factors from school data, and to infer from these patterns what underlying process may be at work. In either case, if it becomes apparent that a particular process is at work, the indicators developed during the research process may be adapted and used by practitioners to help identify the underlying cause of bullying behaviour in specific cases.

The value of this model is that it is sufficiently flexible to accommodate theory drawn from a wide range of paradigms. Indeed, it provides a way of organising theory and so making sense of the relationships between the various processes at work within the system. To integrate theory within this model, it is first necessary to ask, 'At which level of the system is this process operating?' Then to ask, 'What is the function of this particular process?' and 'What is the relationship between this process and other processes already identified at that level of the system?' In this way it becomes possible to understand relationships within and between different levels of the system.

In summary, what has emerged from the research on bullying to date is information about many of the factors involved in bullying: factors within the individual, the family, the peer group, the school, the community and so forth. This model provides further detail and also an explicit framework within which to organise these factors in relation to one another. It does not contradict the existing body of work on school bullying. However, it does suggest the need to expand the way in which the relevant systems and processes are conceptualised. In particular, it suggests the usefulness of construing individuals and groups both as systems in their own right and – simultaneously – as subsystems of

larger wholes. Consequently, many of the processes implicated in bullying may operate outside the conscious awareness of those involved. This has profound implications for research and intervention. It potentially makes research more difficult but it may ultimately provide a way of targeting interventions more precisely and effectively.