

# **The Discussion about School Bullying in Germany**

## **Main assumptions and blind spots**

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## **The Discussion about School Bullying in Germany**

### **Main assumptions and blind spots**

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1. The discussion about school Bullying in Germany is very unilateral. Even today it is mainly based on the ideas with which Dan Olweus started the scientific discussion about systematic peer aggression at school in the 1970s. Alternative explanations and descriptions of the phenomenon did not find its way into the discussion as well as methodological and methodical alternatives to the dominant quantitative-standardized research approach. Therefore, many blind spots in the discussion about Bullying in Germany remain undiscovered.

I would like to explain these statements in the following article. Before I give a short introduction to the main ideas of Dan Olweus, I will briefly describe the historical context in which he developed his theoretical standpoint. Then I will talk about progresses of Olweus' theory and the Bullying research in Germany today. At the end I try to identify the blind spots of Bullying research in Germany.

2. In 1973, Dan Olweus published his famous book "Hackkycklingar och Översittare: Forskning om Skolmobbing (Whipping Boys and Bullying: Research on School Bullying)" in which he presented the first systematic method of studying aggression among peers. He introduced concepts and methods of personal trait psychology to describe and explain this phenomenon. With this focus on individuals, Olweus initiated a pathbreaking conceptual shift in Bullying discussion (Canty, Stubbe, Steers & Collings, 2014). Peter-Paul Heinemann, a German born physician, first introduced the term 'Mobbing' in a Swedish Journal in 1969. Mobbing - in the sense of Heinemann - described groups of schoolchildren excluding or behaving negatively towards an individual child. He strongly associated this term to the system of apartheid and by that "connected it with everyday, human examples of harassment and exclusion" (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014, p. 4). In this context, Mobbing was often linked to the concept

of insufficient tolerance; attention was paid to the fact that children with some sort of deviant trait (they differed in some way from the 'normal' school students) were harassed by other school children (Larsson, 2012, p. 129). A big public debate about peer aggression in schools emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s and Swedish parliament called for measures to cope with the problem of Bullying (Larsson, 2012, p.130).

Dan Olweus responded to that discussion by including Heinemann's concept of Mobbing into his model of aggression he developed in his doctoral thesis published in 1969 (Shott & Søndergaard, 2014, p.5). He preferred the term 'Bullying' and presented four core elements to define it as a special form of aggressive behavior. These four elements are: (1) negative acts of violation, (2) repetition of the negative behavior, (3) harmful intention of the perpetrator and (4) power imbalance of bullies and victims. These core elements can be seen as conditions to differentiate Bullying from other forms of aggressive behavior. If one of these conditions is not satisfied by a specific behavior, it is not within the definition of Bullying.

But Olweus' aim was not just to describe a specific behavior as Bullying. He tried to find a way to explain aggression in order to predict it. In contrast to Heinemann, he argued that Bullying is not a group phenomenon, because social situations and social factors are only temporary and hence have no meaning in explaining aggression. Instead, he claims, psychological characteristics of a person are more constant and therefore relevant to predict peer aggression (Olweus 1977). Olweus made the assumption that aggression is a stable characteristic of a person that gets apparent given the matching social trigger. The social trigger is the presence of what Olweus called the 'whipping boy', which in turn has a specific equipment of appropriate characteristics. In this view, Bullying occurs as a constant reaction of a person to a certain social trigger on bases of stable psychological dispositions to respond. The idea of group aggression nearly disappeared in this viewpoint; instead the focus is on single-perpetrator Bullying. Olweus' definition as well as his explanation of peer aggression are still used in scientific research on Bullying today. A critical review of the definition or the general assumptions barely took place (Canty et al., 2014). Although there are some developments of Olweus' theory, his main ideas are still the essentials of these newer approaches.

3. First developments arose from a critique on the focus on boys. For Olweus, aggression was a specific male characteristic. Consequently he dismissed girls from his early studies. As a result, girls' Bullying practices were not illuminated. Even when

Olweus included girls in his empirical studies, it was still the boys that had much higher rates of Bullying than the girls (Canty et. al., 2014, p. 3). It seemed Olweus' claim of masculine aggression was correct. Since Olweus stated that Bullying exclusively occurs through physical assaults, his critics argued that physical aggression is particularly common among boys while girls use other forms of violence. Later work then focused on other forms of aggression like verbal abuse, relational and exclusionary interactions to capture girls' Bullying (Canty et al., 2014, p. 3). But still today physical forms of Bullying are entirely seen as male practices while relational forms are strongly connected to girls. Even though there is empirical evidence that also boys use relational ways of harassing others and girls are also violent in a physical way, there is yet no great awareness of these phenomenon (Canty et al., 2014, p. 3).

While Bullying often occurs in very stable groups like school classes, where people know each other, it was argued that Bullying cannot be understood without having a closer look at the group dynamics. In Germany, the Participant Role Approach of Christina Salmivalli (1999) is well adopted. She argues that people take different social roles in Bullying situations. Social Roles (or participant roles) result from individual behavioral dispositions (approval for violence) and the expectations of other people (group norms of acceptable behavior). Her aim was to find out what "children do while the bully is harassing the victim" (Salmivalli, 1999, p. 453). In addition to bullies and victims, Salmivalli (1999) described four other role patterns: (1) Assistants help the bully to put the victim in a defensive position; (2) Reinforcer encourage the bully by clapping hands or cheering; (3) Defenders help the victim and try to stop Bullying; (4) Outsiders are not part of the situation (they don't intervene). The merit of Salmivalli and colleagues was to shift the focus from the bully/victim dyad and give empirical evidence that everybody in school class is somehow involved in Bullying. Thus, they pointed out the need to involve the entire school class in Anti-Bullying programs. However, the conceptualization of Bullying as a group phenomenon ends with the empirical description of the typical behavior of group members in Bullying situations and the assertion that role norms determine this behavior. What these concrete norms are and how they are performed in bullying episodes (or even beyond) remains unanswered. Yet it is these social group dynamics that are crucial to understand Bullying and therefore for the development of appropriate Anti-Bullying programs.

4. Even today, scientists in Germany refer primarily on Olweus' definition and its four key elements when investigating Bullying. Modifications to the definition or alternative descriptions of the phenomenon are rarely found. Thus it is not surprising that, following

Olweus' tradition, quantitative approaches are dominating the Bullying research in Germany. One of the most used survey instruments is the revised Olweus Bully/Victim questionnaire. The participants are given a statement or vignette that captures the key elements of the definition. To identify the bullies and the victims, participants have to choose whether they got hurt by another person or hurt a person intentionally. They then have to specify how often the indicated violation took place. This instrument is commonly used for determining prevalence levels of Bullying. The collection of additional social statistical data allows comparisons of the occurrence frequencies by different categories like grade, gender, school type or the diverse forms of Bullying.

In order to identify special characteristics of bullies and victims<sup>1</sup>, some researchers use additional instruments. For example, Pfetsch, Müller and Ittl (2014) use the Basic Empathy Scale to measure the ability of cyberbullies to understand and share the emotional situation of another person. Other researchers are interested in the connection between different roles of group members in the Bullying process and their popularity in the group. Following this research interest, they combine items of the Participant Role Questionnaire of Salmivalli and colleagues with sociometric scales (e.g. Schäfer & Korn, 2004). There are also long-term studies carried out to shed some light whether the participant roles change during time and depending on the context (e.g. transition from primary to junior high school) (e.g. Schäfer, Korn, Brodbeck, Wolke & Schulz, 2005).

5. Developments in the field of Bullying research in Germany is therefore limited to the area of (quantitative) research methods. Olweus' definition and his individual psychological explanation for Bullying remain unquestioned. Although, many results from international research challenge the basic assumptions and core elements of the definition.

Horton (2011) for example argues, that Bullying is a widespread phenomenon among youth. Taking into account that a large number of students are involved into Bullying<sup>2</sup>, Horton (2011, p. 169) concludes that "it seems incomprehensible that bullying emanates from the behavioural characteristics of individuals. (...) it may be more useful to understand school bullying as a social phenomenon involving ordinary children

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1 The search for specific characteristics of bullies and victims reveals the close connection to Olweus' explanatory model of aggression (see above). Nonetheless, the reference to those assumptions is rarely reflected.

2 In Germany, 11,1% of the students from grade five to ten reported being bullied by others; 12,1% said they bullied others (Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann & Jugert, 2006). Following the *Participant Role Approach* of Salmivalli (1999), Schäfer and Korn (2004) report that nine out of ten school children in German *Hauptschule* (high school) have a specific role in the bullying process.

in particular situations". In consequence, he denies the assumption that bullies are deviant, habitually cruel and highly aggressive individuals. Instead, all group members are involved in complex societal and institutional mechanisms of power. These power relations "are the effects of social relations" (Horton, 2011, p. 270). To investigate these multifaceted social interactions one must reject the individual psychological paradigm (Horton 2011, p. 269). There is a growing number of researchers that approach Bullying from a sociological point of view and investigate it as a socially complex phenomenon which mostly implies qualitative research designs<sup>3</sup>. Thornberg (2013) for example combined qualitative interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. He can show that Bullying is a meaning making process in which a person is labelled as abnormal. This label is then used to justify Bullying as a common social practice. It is then almost impossible for the labelled person to change his or her status.

Horton's argumentation shown above still leaves another conclusion: When social and power relations are linked to societal and institutional mechanisms, then the context, in which Bullying occurs, matters. Duncan (2013) for example argues, that different school cultures can be connected to differences in Bullying practices. School children learn the techniques of controlling others from their teachers. If teachers use aggressive strategies of class management, school students will apply those techniques on other children. Duncan's (1999) study of secondary school children shows that Bullying can be a result of a hierarchical and competitive school ethos.

Furthermore Coyne and Monks (2014, pp.175-176) are questioning the idea power inequalities should always be a defining feature of Bullying. Since there are no strong social hierarchies in pre-school classes and thereby no strong differences in power relations associated with the social structure, power differentials hardly play any role for Bullying in these contexts. They are also challenging the defining criteria of repetition. Even one incident can cause fear of being harassed again (Coyne & Monks, 2014, p. 176). Thus you have to take into account the long term effects of the experienced violation and not the quantity of negative acts.

As I tried to show above, expanding the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches can gather new insights in the complex phenomenon of Bullying and lead to a critical reappraisal of Olweus' definition and his theoretical explanation of peer aggression. The dialogue with other researchers and the serious effort to try to understand different research perspectives helps to identify blind spots in one's own work and can lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Thornberg 2015). Therefore it is important for German scientists to recognize the efforts of other

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3 Synoptically see Thornberg (2015).

approaches of Bullying research and critically revise their own work.

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## ドイツの学校におけるいじめに関する議論

主要な想定とそれらの盲点

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### 要 約

ドイツにおけるいじめに関する議論はきわめて一面的に展開している。いじめ現象の記述と説明はほとんど個人的かつ心理的な観点から試みられているが、それとは別の理論的なアプローチが欠如している状態である。一般的かつ標準的な調査方法とは異なる方法の提案も同様にほとんど見られない。

この研究の目的はこうした盲点を指摘することにある。そのためには、まずはドイツにおける中心的な理論の基礎的な想定を、そしてその歴史的な展開の背景をスケッチする。これに引き続いて、いじめに関するさらなる理論的な展開に言及することにする。そしてそれを踏まえて最後の課題であるが、これらの見解の盲点が探究されることになる。