
8. Bullying theory, research, and practice: one-sided coin?

Jacek Pyżalski, Jakub T. Mróz, and Małgorzata Wójcik

INTRODUCTION

School bullying, owing to its prevalence and individual and social consequences, has been in the spotlight for researchers, policymakers, and educational practitioners. It is a serious public health concern in many countries (UNESCO, 2018). Ideally, research should impact policy decisions and educational practices that address bullying prevention and intervention. However, the reality is far from ideal, and a discrepancy between theory and practice is visible. The number of studies on bullying is constantly increasing (Smith et al., 2021) and there is also a growing number of meta-analyses on the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions (Gaffney et al., 2019a, b; Hensums et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2022). As a result, it is easier to identify and examine gaps and ambiguities in the theoretical, empirical, and practical aspects to counteract bullying effectively. We should consider how certain theoretical conceptualizations and operationalizations affect the possibility of reliable measurement and consequently the effectiveness of practical implications. In this chapter, we focus on specific issues related to the interaction between research and practice, highlighting areas of risk and potential for improvement. We begin by presenting the challenges associated with the adequate operationalization of the studied construct and the consequences of discrepancies between researchers' approaches, which may affect the reliability of measurement, as well as the possibility of comparing and integrating existing knowledge. Following this we highlight the potential link between the limited efficacy of anti-bullying interventions and insufficient integration and application of existing knowledge. Finally, we conduct a conceptual analysis of the potential of the salutogenic approach, which might fill gaps in existing anti-bullying solutions.

THEORY: THE FIRST SIDE OF THE COIN

A theory consists of a set of interrelated concepts that help us understand the causes and mechanisms of the investigated phenomena (Haller, 2008). It is a lens through which we recognize and interpret social reality. It also serves as a scaffold to shape this reality constructively. In our case, this means an efficient reduction in the prevalence of bullying within peer groups in educational institutions.

According to Kurt Lewin, one of the pioneers of applied and social psychology, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1943, p. 117). The question arises as to whether this statement fully pertains to bullying theory. Using one of the axioms of classical propositional calculus—the rule of contraposition—we can extend Lewin's thought and conclude that if a theory is not practical, it is not a good theory. This hypothetical idea has manifestations

in reality; if there are gaps or shortcomings in the theoretical understanding, corresponding limitations may also arise in practical applications.

Regarded as a pioneer of research on bullying, Olweus (1993) also emphasized the practical value of theory, aiming to differentiate the theoretical construct of bullying from other violent or aggressive actions observed in peer-group reality (e.g., conflicts and quarrels). Influenced by research on aggression and group violence, Olweus (1993) developed a theoretical approach describing situations in which a target “is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions” (p. 9); “negative action” is understood as “intentional inflicting or attempting to inflict injury or discomfort upon another.” The person experiencing negative actions must have difficulty defending themselves. Thus, to be recognized as bullying, negative actions need to occur in asymmetrical power relationships (physical or psychological) (Olweus, 1993). In summary, the three key characteristics in the original theoretical framework that help to recognize the phenomenon in practice are repetitiveness, intentionality, and power imbalance.

In contemporary research, the operationalization of bullying calls for reflection on whether a consensus in the literature on the key defining components of the bullying phenomenon really exists. Is the measured construct always the same? Therefore, do we always refer to the same construct when analyzing bullying research results?

If we look into the seemingly straightforward criterion of repetition, it does not specify whether the repetition needs to occur between the same or different students (Berger, 2007), or how often and for how long the behavior must occur to be counted as repetitive (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Gladden et al. (2014) define bullying as a behavior that “is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated” (p. 7) without specifying how to determine whether a single incident is highly likely to be repeated. The repetition criterion is also problematic in the case of cyberbullying, as the act may be carried out once, and can then be repetitively passed along, viewed, and commented on (Horton Horton, 2016a, b; Volk et al., 2017). The same applies to vulgar or threatening writing in various places in schools. Moreover, Tattum (1997) points out that the experiential criterion of the definition of bullying states that a single bullying incident (e.g., a threat) may cause lasting fear and in this way fulfill the definitional criterion of repetition.

The definition proposed by the Pacer’s National Bullying Prevention Center (2022) states that we can talk about bullying when behavior is repeated, although a single incident may be considered bullying if it is severe or if it forms a related pattern of behavior. But still, from a practical standpoint, the question remains: who should determine whether a behavior is severe or evokes a specific pattern of behaviors, and whether that pattern is related, and how?

Difficulties in proper operationalization also relate to the criterion of intentionality, as pointed out by some scholars (Slattery et al., 2019). According to Olweus (1993), intent to harm refers to willful negative thoughts when someone attempts to inflict injury, harm, or discomfort on another person. Research has shown ambiguity when considering intentions, outcomes, and unwanted behaviors (Guerin & Hennessey, 2002). Certain behaviors judged as unharmed may lead to harm in certain social contexts (e.g., teasing or name-calling in certain class cultures) (Teräsahjo & Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010). Certain behaviors are grounded in a local class culture that uses secret codes and collusive communication to mislead observers by using double messages. Therefore, behaviors normally interpreted as unharmed and even friendly are intended to humiliate, insult, and exclude (Hamarus & Kaikkonen, 2008; Wójcik, 2018). Moreover, participants in bullying situations may disagree with their intentions

(Sercombe & Donnelly, 2013). There is ambiguity concerning the awareness of harm, the subjectivity of intention, and ambiguity in multifaceted situations (Chang, 2021). Thus, psychological harm is derived from the interpretation of both the context and behavior and may not always be perceived as participants intended. All the previously mentioned ambiguities make the practical operationalization and measurement of intentionality a significant challenge.

The criterion of power imbalance also poses practical challenges in capturing the theoretical construct, as can be seen in the definition provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which states that bullying is a behavior “that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance” (Gladden et al., 2014, p. 7). The question arises: should the power imbalance be observed, or perceived? Does this pertain to the event itself or the targeted person’s interpretation of the event? Some scholars have attempted to clarify what the power imbalance criterion is, stating that it addresses situations in which targeted individuals are disadvantaged or less powerful in their interactions with the perpetrator or the perpetrators (e.g., Cowie & Jennifer, 2008; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Yang & Salmivalli, 2015). A further problem with the criterion lies in recognizing different sources of power. Literature often fails to differentiate and define physical, mental, psychological, and social strength (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Brain, 2000). The recent definition of bullying suggested during the World Anti-Bullying Forum in 2021 points out that the imbalance of power is enabled or inhibited by social and institutional norms, the context of schools, and the educational system. This definition also implies an absence of effective responses and care toward the target by peers and adults (WABF, 2021). In practice, this means that achieving theoretical validity for this criterion is very challenging, and it is often the most overlooked criterion in measurement tools.

The differences in how key components of bullying definitions are described by different researchers or institutions may lead to the conclusion that, instead of facilitating accurate recognition, such definitions cause increasing confusion. Slattery et al. (2019) stated that definitional criteria, although providing some insight, generate many additional problems. Considering the practical effects of the definition, the lack of clarity may be crucial when deciding what power imbalance, intention, or repetition actually means. This problem is very visible in Slattery and colleagues’ (2019) literature review of 901 studies that show differences in defining bullying in research: 57% of the studies had an unclear definition of bullying, 17% required the bullying act to be intentional, 25% required the act to have happened more than once, and 32% required an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and target. Some of these studies referred to one or more definitional principles.

The vagueness of definitional criteria and flexibility in their interpretation result in the loss of certainty that the measurement reflects the reality it is intended to represent. This directly affects the operationalization of the measured variables in the research instruments used for data collection. In a meta-analysis of 75 instruments, Xie et al. (2023, p. 252) concluded that “[a]bout three quarters (74.7%) of the instruments incorporated ‘repetition’ into items or response options, while ‘intention to harm’ was considered in less than 50% of tools (48.9%), as was ‘power imbalance’ (46.8%).” Despite reported moderate to high indicators of research instruments’ reliability, most did not assess the validity of the measure, “thus leaving the question of whether the surveys accurately measured what they aimed to measure unanswered” (Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2014, p. 432).

Measurement validity and reliability in the social sciences are also closely related to differences in the emic and etic perspectives of the measured phenomenon/construct. In social science research, social eyes and ears installed directly in social bodies, as stated by Lewin

(1946), play an extremely important role. Individuals experiencing particular aspects of social reality respond to questions, whether during interviews or in the form of questionnaire items. It is not a groundbreaking idea that the way social eyes and ears perceive, see, and hear a phenomenon determines their responses.

An issue that requires distinct attention is the general aspect of social interpretation of bullying acts by young people who are involved, parents, and teachers. According to qualitative analyses presented by Jeffrey and Stuart (2019), young people often have a different understanding of what repetitiveness, intention, and power mean compared with researchers' understanding, and their importance when they are interpreted as elements of bullying events. There are many more complexities and nuances to behavior in real-life situations that are intrinsically linked to how young people understand bullying. Differences in the emic perception of the phenomenon can also be observed when analyzing the narratives of teachers and parents (Mishna et al., 2005, 2006).

The issue is further complicated by the fact that the term "bullying" is not used consistently, incorporating words such as harassment, peer aggression, peer violence, or intimidation which further widens the knowledge gap arising between theoretical assumptions and samples of behaviors used for analysis. The way in which the word bullying is translated across languages and understood differently across cultures and contexts adds to the confusion (Smith et al., 2002).

The theoretical difficulties mentioned above directly affect the development of research plans, operationalization, preparation, or selection of research instruments, and, ultimately, the validity and reliability of the results. Therefore, do the conclusions we have drawn pertain specifically to bullying, or to all forms of peer aggression and violence? Alternatively, or perhaps just to the participants' awareness of them? Moreover, what may be considered most crucial is that we may neglect a significant part of the phenomenon in our research because it is challenging to label it in a previously described manner (e.g., inaction-based collusive exclusion rarely fulfills the criteria for aggressive behavior). Certainly, from this perspective, it is evident that there is a discrepancy between the theoretical assumptions, conceptualization of the phenomenon, and the part of reality that is actually being measured. This prompts reflections on whether empirically based evidence relying on low operationalization validity allows for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies.

As Saarento and Salmivalli (2015) point out, the discrepancy between theory and practice should motivate increased collaboration between researchers, practitioners, parents, and policymakers to integrate evidence-based programs and tools. Given the aforementioned difficulties with operationalization and measurement, it is worth extending this powerful idea, which should motivate us to work together to investigate whether evidence-based programs rely on valid and reliable evidence. The widely discussed replicability crisis in the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences (Romero, 2019) has not bypassed bullying research. It is worth making joint efforts to revise existing knowledge, systematize it, and develop a coherent theory of bullying that is widely accepted.

Given the pervasive nature of the phenomenon and the consistently documented limited efficacy of introduced anti-bullying interventions, these problems should be regarded as serious. It is crucial to consider these problems not only within academic circles but also in practical settings. Theory and practice are two sides of the same coin; thus, this discussion directly impacts real-world applications.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN ...

When we consider the practical applications of research, we refer to altering the frequency or trajectory of a phenomenon. In the case of bullying, this can be accomplished through prevention and intervention strategies. The ability to actively influence the course of a phenomenon or process empirically confirms the validity of the theoretically described triggering or sustaining mechanisms. This idea was well illustrated by Lewin, who said, “The best way to understand something is to try to change it” (as cited in Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 19). This concept emphasizes that theory, research, and prevention or intervention (practice) are interconnected when addressing the same phenomenon. If we apply Lewin’s logic and begin reasoning about our understanding of the bullying phenomenon based on the effectiveness of intervention and prevention, our conclusions might not be straightforward.

Meta-analyses on the effectiveness of anti-bullying prevention and intervention programs published in recent years differ in terms of the rigor of their inclusion criteria and the analytical methods employed, and vary in the reported effectiveness and diversity of interpretations of the statistical analysis results. Because of space limitations, we present the results of two meta-analyses that differ in terms of inclusion criteria and statistical methods used.

Fraguas et al. (2021) evaluated the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions in 69 randomized clinical trials (RCTs). They found a noticeable impact on reducing the occurrence of bullying, though the effect size was small. Additionally, the duration of the intervention (1–144 weeks) was found to be statistically insignificant concerning the effectiveness of the intervention, and the effectiveness did not diminish over the follow-up period (2–104 weeks). These conclusions lead to the question of whether the observed effects might be the result of other factors, such as natural changes in student behavior with age, the influence of other elements of the school context that were not studied, or even a placebo effect (students feeling better simply from the awareness of actions being taken). In the updated meta-analysis conducted by Gaffney et al. (2021), the inclusion criteria were more liberal, with quasi-experimental designs considered as well. They also indicate a small effect size on the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs, both in terms of reducing bullying perpetration and bullying victimization (with a greater reduction in perpetration). Researchers point out significant limitations in the ability to recognize and understand the “true effect” because of the statistical procedures necessary in conducting meta-analyses, as well as a limited ability to draw causal conclusions.

Previously discussed limitations, stemming from discrepancies among theory, research, and practice, also pertain to the meta-analyses. For instance, the studies within the meta-analyses employed diverse measurement tools, with variations in the assessment periods for bullying behaviors—ranging from three months to the entire school duration. Furthermore, studies utilized a mixture of continuous or dichotomous measures of school bullying and different cut-off points for categories such as victim, perpetrator, and uninvolved. Moreover, Gaffney and colleagues suggest interpreting the results as a decrease in *reported* bullying perpetration and victimization and not necessarily as a *behavioral change* (Gaffney et al., 2021). That seems reasonable: a decrease in bullying behavior may be interpreted as indicating the effectiveness of the program, although it may also result from not reporting one’s own behaviors that were identified as inappropriate during the anti-bullying program. Specifically, this might be relevant when measuring bullying perpetration and may account for the observed differences between bullying perpetration and bullying victimization reported by Gaffney et al. (2021). If the measurement was performed using a sample question, e.g., “How often have you insulted

or hurt other students during the last two months?”, raising awareness of the harmfulness of bullying may lead to a change in declared attitudes rather than actual observable behaviors. The results indicating the inverse effectiveness of interventions in the experimental group are often interpreted as an increase in awareness of the phenomenon or implementation fidelity; however, this logic is rarely applied to the interpretation of results confirming effectiveness (Schultes, 2014; Strohmeier et al., 2021; Yanagida et al., 2019).

Setting aside the methodological limitations of the presented meta-analyses, and accepting them without rigorous examination, we must acknowledge that anti-bullying programs have a significant but small effect, and these findings are consistent with earlier meta-analyses (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Drawing on Lewin’s idea of understanding through change, our knowledge of bullying appears as limited as the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs.

Definitional challenges and the subsequent difficulties in measuring program effectiveness (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011) are just one potential reason for the low efficacy of anti-bullying interventions. Another could be the insufficient integration of knowledge amassed in the extensive literature on the mechanisms of the bullying phenomenon. Bullying, as described by Horton (2016a), is a function of the person and the broadly understood environment. This is a practical application and a more detailed elaboration of Lewin’s conception that behavior is a function of the interactions between people and environments (Lewin, 1935). This formula applies to human functioning in general and emphasizes an interplay between many personal and contextual factors. This idea inspired Bronfenbrenner (1977) to develop the ecological systems perspective, which views human development as influenced by interconnected systems, from the microsystem to the chronosystem. It became the basis for the application of the socio-ecological model in bullying research, and numerous leading scholars in the field have investigated contextual mechanisms that either sustain or mitigate bullying behaviors (Espelage, 2014; Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Horton, 2016a; Horton et al., 2020; Thornberg, 2015; Wójcik & Mondry, 2020; Wójcik et al., 2022). This theoretical approach necessitates consideration of broader contexts in considering the phenomenon of bullying; consequently, when developing anti-bullying programs or interventions, it is essential to incorporate this understanding of immediate and broader contexts to ensure their efficacy and relevance. If we consider theory and practice as two sides of the same coin, macro-level norms influence the functioning of both mesosystems and microsystems and consequently the functioning of individuals. Thus, it is essential to consider them when developing an anti-bullying program. The way we attempt to impact peer ecology and encourage peer support in bullying situations should also be informed by sets of norms that operate within a given society and, in some cases, even within schools and classes.

To illustrate the role of social norms as an important cultural context element in interventions, we have selected specific examples, as it is not possible to condense extensive cross-cultural findings in the bullying field into a single chapter. We have chosen countries with significant cultural differences to make the influence on intervention strategies easily observable, and where research on bullying has been conducted extensively: the United Kingdom, Japan, and Poland (e.g., Kidwai & Smith, 2024; Przewłocka, 2015; Pyżalski, 2012; Rigby & Smith, 2011; Toda, 2016; Toda & Kanetsuna, 2021; Wójcik et al., 2022).

One element of bullying prevention and intervention strategies is based on peer support schemes which aim to help both individual students and, more importantly, change the culture of the school (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). However, peer support activities must be flexible

and adapted to suit different cultures and contexts. For example, in the United Kingdom pastoral care is not only a well-established social norm but also a popular framework for programs aiming to enhance the well-being of individuals in different institutions, including schools (Houlston & Smith, 2009). Peer support programs in the UK involve individuals providing assistance, guidance, and emotional support to their peers who may be experiencing challenging issues, including bullying. Peer support schemes may include face-to-face activities based on a buddying/befriending approach, mediation, and mentoring (Cowie & Smith 2012).

When interventions based on peer support schemes are planned in Japan, different sets of macro-level cultural norms must be considered. In Japanese society, being a victim of social exclusion and bullying is considered shameful and humiliating. Therefore, peer support cannot include face-to-face contact or activities. It is carried out through anonymous postboxes, confidential email services, and letter writing (often moderated by teachers) without the peer supporter knowing the identity of the student being helped (Cowie & James, 2016). Bullied students are thus protected from shame and humiliation.

The influence of macro-level cultural norms stemming from a society's historical experiences may be observed in Poland, which is the chapter authors' primary research domain. In Poland, there is a need to protect the identities of peer supporters, especially those who want to report bullying and ask adults for help. The socially shared distrust towards authority (derived from Poland's communist past) (Arcimowicz et al., 2018) is incorporated into school class cultures and manifests in attitudes toward the relationship between teachers and students. Teachers are seen as authorities with power and control and are therefore opposed in some ways. Middle and secondary school students believe that they should deal with class matters independently and if someone reports this, they could be accused of being an informant and excluded from the class community (Wójcik & Kozak, 2015). What derives from the norm "do not report and do not be a snitch" is a strong reluctance to disclose bullying incidents to the school staff by victims and bystanders. Besides recognizing the risks associated with reporting bullying, students also view official reporting channels as unsafe and lacking confidentiality (Wójcik & Rzeńca, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to implement measures that guarantee the safety and security of individuals who desire to intervene or report incidents. This involves considering factors like safety and anonymity, initial contact for reporting, the level of confidentiality, and the accessibility of adults. For example, the RESQL bullying prevention system introduced in some Polish schools enables students to anonymously and safely report bullying to a dedicated person in their schools, chosen and indicated by the students themselves (Kaczan et al., 2021).

The contextual influences demonstrated in examples of intervention strategies in the UK, Japan, and Poland highlight the need for knowledge integration to design tailored solutions that consider the normative context of each specific social setting. Arguments supporting this reasoning are also provided by Hensums et al. (2023), who indicated that the effectiveness of the same intervention for different subgroups or individuals may vary from harmful to significant improvement. We need to go beyond the evaluation of single evidence-based programs toward understanding more specific facilitating mechanisms and contextual factors operating in particular groups and consider them when designing interventions for particular cases. The idea of developing a universal anti-bullying intervention program is attractive and seems reasonable when considering a cost-benefit analysis. However, the current state of knowledge suggests that efforts in this area should be directed toward practical actions within specific macro-, meso-, and micro-level cultural contexts.

THE OTHER SIDE OF BULLYING ...

Typically, establishing the aims of anti-bullying programs requires focusing on bullying. That is, the main aim of intervention programs is to prevent harmful behaviors. This approach has important consequences because it affects the main areas and components of anti-bullying activities at the school level. Gaffney et al. (2021) analyzed the key features of 65 different school-based bullying intervention and prevention programs. The predominant components center on educational activities to raise awareness of bullying mechanisms among teachers and students, train adolescents to support their peers and respond to bullying situations and cope with difficult emotions, increase awareness about empathy, promote problem-solving methods and effective communication, increase parental awareness of bullying phenomenon, enhance socio-emotional competencies, and teach mindfulness-based techniques. Other types of interventions include individual interventions for bullies and victims, activating bystanders for support, and involving parents in supporting their children. Other components focus on implementing discipline and rules, such as zero tolerance for bullying, or a non-punitive policy. Programs can be delivered by professionals, specially trained educators, or in some instances by trained adolescents. Techniques vary from workshops, DVDs, brochures and letters, curriculum-based methods, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques, or mindfulness practices, to modern technologies such as interactive games, virtual reality experiences, and web forums (Gaffney et al., 2021). However, a consistent emphasis across these components is to recognize behaviors that can be categorized as bullying, understand how these actions can harm others, and teach appropriate responses when witnessing bullying incidents. Even in rare cases where programs emphasize positive peer relationships in their titles or aims, the main focus is on promoting constructive peer responses when encountering instances of bullying (e.g., helping a victim; McGoe et al., 2023).

The intervention strategy outlined above is embedded in the primary approach to bullying research. This is reasonable and useful for supporting a safe social environment; however, it has serious limitations that need to be addressed (e.g., focusing mainly on risk factors). Such an approach may be complemented by a more community-based strategy that has its origins in salutogenesis and is traditionally associated with health, well-being, and coping with stressors in everyday life. This may be achieved by focusing on all people in the system instead of those at risk, promoting salutary factors instead of removing risk factors, and concentrating on the whole person instead of the “diseased area” (Antonovsky, 1987). The motivational, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of human activity are the focus of the notion of “sense of coherence” (SoC) developed by Antonovsky (1987), whose sources can include factors such as culture, social forces, and social position. When we consider SoC in a social context, we discuss the community sense of coherence (CSoc), characterized by the perception that one’s community is predictable, safe, and secure, is known and understood, can assist its members and is available to them, gives meaning to its members, provides challenges, and is worthy of investment and engagement (Sagy & Mana, 2017). These characteristics encompass a comprehensive range of psychosocial factors that, when absent, may facilitate the occurrence and persistence of the bullying process. Some interdisciplinary studies have used a salutogenetic approach to investigate relationships between members of a community (e.g., Maass et al., 2014; Morton & Lurie, 2013). Therefore, there is a significant rationale behind adopting a salutogenic approach in bullying research and practice.

First, the lack of bullying does not necessarily mean that a peer group embraces strong interpersonal relations and a high-quality social climate, which are significant in building good mental health (Güroğlu, 2022; Skrzypiec et al., 2012).. From this perspective, intervention activities aimed at supporting community building and bullying prevention should have equal importance. What is vital is that these two main aims require qualitatively different actions to create educational content and introduce practical activities.

Second, the bullying process often begins with an initial attack in the form of relational bullying (e.g., exclusion), and then turns into other forms, such as verbal, physical, or cyber (Jaskulska & Poleszak, 2015; Pyżalski, 2012; Thornberg, 2015). This finding indicates that building supportive relationships is beneficial. When we symbolically imagine links to other people as ropes and threads of various thicknesses (symbols of the strengths of relations), we understand why initiating and maintaining relationships is the primary means of preventing bullying. From the perspective of those engaged in the relationship, having a rope or a thread that links to someone works to prevent bullying via at least three complementary mechanisms:

- (1) It lowers the motivation to harm someone, regardless of how. When someone is a colleague or friend, they are discouraged from engaging in any hostile actions against them (Pahl, 2000).
- (2) It heightens the likelihood of prosocial behavior, supporting the person linked to us. Multiple findings support the friendship protection hypothesis, suggesting that friends can protect individuals against victimization. The findings also showed a readiness to defend bullied friends or acquaintances. Moreover, the friendship protection hypothesis suggests that having friends might help as a buffer against negative experiences and subsequent outcomes (Hodges et al., 1999).
- (3) It increases the chance that initial attacks, quarrels, or conflicts will not turn into the first or full-blown stage of bullying because of the presence of victimized students' friends (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Mróz et al., 2022).

Mechanisms of exclusion as roots for bullying processes are particularly common and serious in the case of children who because of some individual characteristics are considered "different" by the group. This finding may be related to special needs (e.g., Plichta, 2015; Pyżalski & Roland, 2010; Thompson et al., 1994), migration status (e.g., Pyżalski & Smith, 2022), LGBTQ+ identity (Berry, 2018), or many other factors. Thus, fostering strong interpersonal links among community members can help overcome potential risk factors.

These short conceptual analyses suggest that it would be beneficial if anti-bullying intervention programs prioritized pre-emptive measures that are not aimed at reacting to bullying situations, but rather at constructing their opposition, which involve a valuable community based on strong interpersonal relations. These activities should not be restricted to education and basic-level workshops but should rather focus on everyday situations when students have numerous opportunities for contact and cooperation (e.g., randomly changing seats in the new groups so that all students have at least some contact with others at an early stage of group formation). This does not mean that the "reaction component" should be removed. It is necessary in inevitable situations when peer aggression or bullying occurs. Still, adding or strengthening the proactive component would be beneficial and in many cases, it would act as a preventive measure against violence. We realize that introducing those recommendations is challenging due to numerous factors: resource constraints, resistance to change, or logistic issues. Altering the culture of a school or community to prioritize proactive measures based on strong inter-

personal relationships may require significant time and effort as it involves changing the behaviors and mindsets of students, staff, and other stakeholders. However, implementing preventive measures in schools could be facilitated by providing simple and easy-to-apply techniques, focused on enhancing the quality of functioning in the school setting. To accomplish this, bullying researchers should provide straightforward instructions based on valid and reliable evidence for specific strategies that can foster the development of salutary factors in given macro- and micro-cultural contexts. Achieving this necessitates the development of new research designs that can explore potential connections between existing bullying knowledge and salutogenic approaches.

What may facilitate the implementation of preventive measures is providing practitioners with specific, simple-to-apply intervention components that may bring observable benefits to all members of the peer group, enhancing the quality of functioning in a school setting. The role of bullying researchers could be to provide valid and reliable evidence pointing to the impact of certain strategy components on the development of salutary factors in given macro- and micro-cultural contexts. There is a need to develop, test, and implement studies on interventions in the school setting that can explore potential connections between existing bullying knowledge and salutogenic approaches and models, that emphasize community or collective dimensions.

CONCLUSIONS

It is imperative to rethink the current state of the art and review research findings in terms of operationalization, methodology, and inference correctness. It is crucial to recognize and acknowledge gaps, inconsistencies, and ambiguities in theoretical and research approaches, and to implement the results in practice. Joint efforts to understand potential weaknesses should lead to a coherent conceptualization of the phenomenon and extended research introducing revised methodologies, considering the applicability of the expected results. Generating theoretical knowledge that cannot be effectively applied to practical interventions has limited utility when addressing such serious issues. Thus, research on bullying should be accompanied by continuous awareness of the need for convergence between theoretical and practical perspectives. Attention must be paid to the way research findings are communicated so that they are useful for practitioners. As recently proposed by bullying researchers, the necessity for a “new turn” must extend beyond academic deliberation and provide practitioners with understandable and applicable knowledge (WABF, 2021). These aims, while ambitious, are absolutely necessary in overcoming the current crisis in the area of bullying research and practice. There is a need to design practical interventions, or rather practical components, for teachers to choose from if bullying occurs, and they need to influence certain mechanisms in a peer group. Therefore, we need to research and understand the mechanisms and contextual factors operating in particular groups and then incorporate the knowledge to develop made-to-measure interventions informed by specific macro-, meso-, and micro-level cultural contexts.

The problems listed above suggest extensions to existing approaches to bullying prevention by complementing them using a salutogenic approach focused on building a community based on interpersonal relations, which may be a positive factor that counteracts bullying. It also undertakes research projects that investigate the relationships among members of a peer

group in a salutogenic manner. The desired outcome may be a change in attitudes toward anti-bullying programs that should focus on avoiding exclusion by building and maintaining a class community. The shift will be from reacting to bullying behaviors after they occur to proactive measures fostering a healthier and safer social environment that minimizes the occurrence of bullying acts.

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