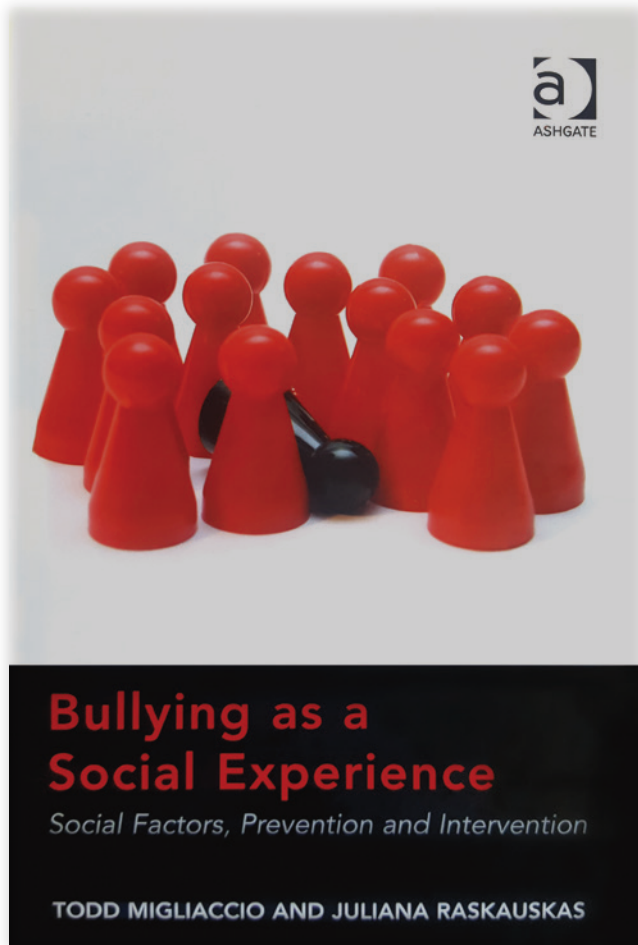


## BOOK REVIEW

# Bullying as a Social Experience: Social Factors, Prevention and Intervention

By Todd Migliaccio and Juliana Raskauskas

Reviewer: Mimi Coughlin, Ph.D., California State University, Sacramento



This concise volume is replete with citations, providing analysis and meta-analysis, of literature from around the world on the phenomena of childhood bullying in school settings. Students and scholars will find the over 550 references provided to be a valuable resource to orient them to research in the field, and to hone research questions and methodologies for collecting and analyzing data. Serving this important purpose, however, is only one of the many accomplishments of this book.

First and foremost, Migliaccio and Raskauskas present a theoretical framework and an extended argument about the socio-cultural characteristics and contexts of bullying. They use this approach, not to negate, but to helpfully challenge “everything you thought you already knew about bullying” (the title of the concluding chapter of the book). Secondly, the authors review scholarship on bullying and programs aimed at reducing it through their theoretical lens. Finally, the authors recommend intervention and prevention strategies that engage all stakeholders in changing the attitudes, behaviors, and structures that promote or maintain bullying in school settings.

Throughout the text, the authors develop a theoretical foundation, drawn from the field of sociology, that supports their analysis of the dynamic relationships between the causes, consequences and contexts of bullying. Under the larger umbrella of Systems Theory, Migliaccio and Raskauskas overlay the Ecological Model with the multidirectional dynamics of Symbolic Interactionism. The Ecological Model represents layers, or strata, of systems that represent the individual within increasing larger spheres, e.g. child, classroom, school, district, community, culture. Symbolic Interactionism emphasizes the reciprocal influences between the spheres.

These relationships are illustrated in the diagram below. The solid lined ovals represent strata that impact how bullying is challenged or reproduced. The dashed ovals represent

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permeable feedback loops characteristic of Symbolic Interactionism as they operate within an Ecological Model (see diagram 2.1). Migliaccio and Raskauskas argue that the dynamics of Symbolic Interactionism strengthens the explanatory power of the Ecological Model as it applies to bullying. For the authors, bullying cannot be understood as an isolated intrapersonal or interpersonal phenomenon, but is a socio-cultural phenomenon that persists or desists, based upon the actions and reactions of the systems in which it occurs.

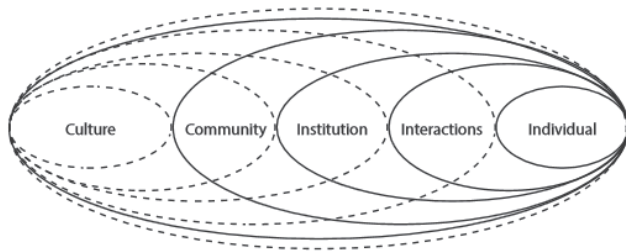


Figure 2.1 Ecological systems with feedback model

The three key components that must be present to characterize a social interaction as bullying, according to Migliaccio and Raskauskas, are power, intent, and persistence. Bullying behavior, occurs over time, with the purpose of inflicting harm, to enhance the status of the perpetrator. Bad behavior between people and within groups, even if it is violent, does not rise to the definition of bullying if it does not have these characteristics. This distinction is central to understanding the dynamics of bullying.

For example, the authors use international data to illuminate the largest system (culture) within which the smaller systems of community, classroom etc. operate. Studies from around the world allow for a comparative analysis of how cultures define and respond to the universal phenomena of bullying in school settings. Migliaccio and Raskauskas organize this discussion around collectivist and individualist cultures. Here the authors present several specific prevention and intervention strategies that are individual-oriented as well as programs that are group-oriented. They suggest that when developing a local approach to bullying, the larger cultural context needs to be engaged.

Next the authors delve into the community layer of the Ecological Model. Here the focus is on the role and impact of

the community, family, and criminal justice system on bullying. Off-campus incidents including cyber-bullying are also considered in this context. Awareness building that takes place in these contexts sends an important message that bullying is unacceptable to the community at large, and that there are many stakeholders who can work together to reduce the negative impact it has on people's lives.

School-based practitioners will be especially interested in Migliaccio and Raskauskas' reviews of programs employing the "Whole-School Approach" which

focus on changes at the institutional strata of the Ecological Model. Here the importance of including all school personnel in strategies for reducing and preventing bullying is underlined by data that indicate the frequency of bullying incidents that occur in areas such as the cafeteria and play ground. Using GIS technology (Geographic Information System) to map this data reveals bullying "hot spots." This information can be used to target interventions in precise areas where bullying is prominent. The authors concede that these interventions may appear in the short-run to simply move rather than eliminate bullying. Migliaccio and Raskauskas conclude that with persistence, this approach has the potential to reduce bullying through continued hot spot monitoring, focused observation, and efforts to change bystander response.

Next a review of the research literature on *who* is bullied is analyzed. Patterns that are likely to be sadly familiar to readers are discussed: students who are (or are perceived to be) members of a group determined to be "lesser than" within existing hierarchies are more likely to be bullied. The socially constructed meaning of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, and ability are relevant factors to the extent they are associated with access to power within the particular social setting. Migliaccio and Raskauskas reiterate that bullying, by definition, is a play to increase the status of the bully, not only over the victim, but in the eyes of the bystanders whose tacit or explicit approval give legitimacy to the particular tool used by the bully e.g., racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, etc. Because these risk factors are not statically associated with the identity of the victim but are fluid and socially determined, the authors encourage bully reduction programs that increase acceptance of diversity and build values of tolerance and respect for all members of the community. This is a more holistic and generative approach than stand-alone interventions developed for particular marginalized groups.

Anybody who has been a student in a traditional elementary or secondary school instinctively knows the power of group affiliation. Social isolation is a primary factor in victimization, and social connection is a powerful antidote. All students benefit from a sense of belonging and the social support of membership within a friendship, interest, or activity-based sub-group. This is not to discount bullying that can occur within groups as well as tension between groups. Migliaccio and Raskauskas examine the research literature on the perplexities of group dynamics through the lens of social networking analysis. For example, *Mix it Up Day*, a program established by the Southern Poverty Law Center, seek to reduce bullying by breaking down barriers between cliques, creating new bonds of association, and challenging myths and stereotypes.

In the final chapter of the book, *Everything You Thought You Already Knew About Bullying*, the authors acknowledge that while a socio/cultural perspective is a theoretically sound approach to understanding and interrupting bullying, this does not preclude attention to the psychological and emotional needs of the individuals most impacted. Victims, bystanders, and even bullies themselves all suffer from their involvement with incidents of bullying. Interventions aimed at the innermost sphere of the Ecological Model tend to focus on developing the cognitive, social, and behavioral skills of individuals within the school setting. This can effectively increase awareness of bullying and the resources in place to reduce it. Specific skills to be developed during trainings for school staff and with children are enumerated as are school-based strategies and policies (p. 145).

This book provides a valuable theoretical and empirical guide to the phenomena of bullying among children in school settings. The title indicates a broad treatment of bullying, so readers looking to understand bullying in other settings will need to look elsewhere. A focus on the social dynamics of bullying and the framing of prevention and intervention within an ecological/social interaction model is illuminating. However, educators are likely to be left wanting more guidance to actively engage their community in transforming cultures that support bullying. Examples of the types of comprehensive approaches the authors recommend are not presented in any detail. An additional section on implementation would help teachers and administrators seeking to reform school practices. Specifically, a template built on the ecological/ social interactionism model to help schools create and sustain “bully

free” cultures would be a useful tool.

The authors, however, caution that there is no “quick fix,” and that launching an effort to reduce bullying may actually seem to have the effect of increasing it – in the short term. This is a natural and useful result of drawing attention to phenomena that thrives in cultures of silence or denial. Lest readers become discouraged by the size and complexity of bullying, Migliaccio and Raskauskas end on an optimistic note that is consistent with their theoretical frame, “Bullying resides within a culture, and persists through social interactions, which means we all have a role in changing it. It is a social problem that we all experience, and ultimately from which we all suffer. But, in the end we have the ability to change it.”

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Mimi Coughlin is a Professor in the College of Education at California State University, Sacramento, where her teaching focus is critical multicultural curriculum and instruction. Her research and writing are in the areas of interdisciplinary teaching and experiential learning.*

*This review is dedicated to the life and legacy of Dr. Juliana Raskauskas, whose kindness, humor, work ethic, and record of scholarship inspired her colleagues and will assist future researchers and practitioners in the field of bullying.*

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