



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

BULLYING *in an* ABORIGINAL CONTEXT

JULI COFFIN¹,
ANN LARSON¹
& DONNA CROSS²

¹ Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health,
The University of Western Australia, PO Box 109,
Geraldton, Western Australia, 3561, Australia

² Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith
Cowan University, 2 Bradford Street, Mt Lawley,
Western Australia, 6050, Australia

■ Abstract

Aboriginal children appear to be more likely to be involved in bullying than non-Aboriginal children. This paper describes part of the "Solid Kids Solid Schools" research process and discusses some of the results from this three year study involving over 260 Aboriginal children, youth, elders, teachers and Aboriginal Indigenous Education Officers (AIEO's), and an Aboriginal led and developed Steering Committee. It is the first study that contextualises Aboriginal bullying, using a socio-ecological model where the individual, family, community and society are all interrelated and influence the characteristics and outcomes of bullying.

This paper demonstrates that for Aboriginal children and youth in one region of Western Australia, bullying occurs frequently and is perpetuated by family and community violence, parental responses to bullying and institutional racism. Addressing bullying requires actions to reduce violence, foster positive cultural identity and reduce socio-economic disadvantage.

■ Introduction

The explosion of research on bullying which has occurred since the 1990s has focused on dominant populations in Europe and the European settler societies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States (Berger, 2007). More recently there has been attention to the bullying among ethnic and racial minorities, particular immigrant communities in Europe (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002) and African Americans in the United States (Fitzpatrick et al., 2010). Very little research has been done in regard to bullying in Indigenous populations. However, this is starting to change with the publication of a few quantitative studies of Indigenous children's experience of bullying in Australia (Craven & Bodkin-Andrews, 2006; Zubrick et al., 2005), Norway (Hansen et al., 2008) and New Zealand (Maxim Institute, 2006).

Bullying behavior can be physical, social or psychological in nature but it always involves unprovoked intent to harm which occurs repeatedly in familiar social settings and incorporates a power imbalance (Griffin Smith & Gross, 2006; Olweus, 1994; Rigby, 2000). The association between poor health and bullying is a growing area of concern (Rigby, 1997). Students who are bullied tend to suffer from: poorer health (Rigby 1998; Slee, 1995) and more somatic complaints (Rigby 1998; Williams et al., 1996); lower self-esteem (Rigby & Slee, 1991; Slee & Rigby, 1993); more interpersonal difficulties (Kumpulainen et al., 1998); higher levels of loneliness (Forero et al., 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a, 1996b); depression; suicidal ideation (Rigby, 1999); and increased anxiety (Slee, 1994). As such they are also more likely to both dislike (Forero et al., 1999) and want to avoid school (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a; Rigby, 1997), so their level of academic competence tends to be lower, while their level of absenteeism is frequently higher (Zubrick et al., 1997). Children who bully others are also at risk of social maladjustment later in life, and lack opportunities to attain socially desired objectives, such as employment, family, marriage and other mainstream normative expectations (Farrington, 1993).

One factor that has been relatively under-researched is the role of culture and social context in influencing the prevalence, features and triggers of bullying (Berger, 2006). The inconsistent record of bullying prevention programs is likely to be at least in part because of a lack of understanding on how socio-cultural context reinforces bullying behaviour in different ways (for

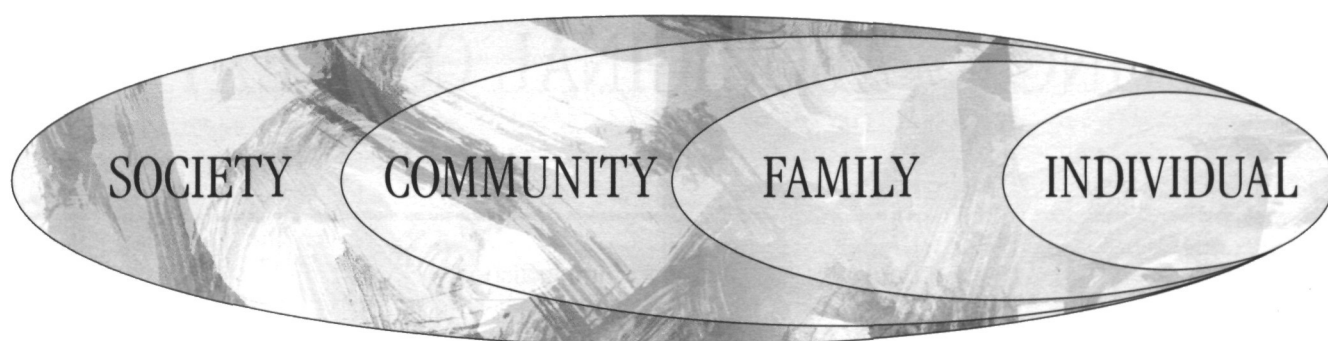


Figure 1. Socio-ecological model.

example, Hong (2009) on interventions in low-income schools in the United States. We argue that bullying involving Aboriginal children and youth cannot be effectively tackled by mainstream programs that fail to understand and engage with their cultural, familial and socio-economic realities.

This paper uses a social-ecological framework to explore how Aboriginal culture and context in one region of Australia influences bullying behaviour. As a starting point we use a framework developed to study violence from a public health perspective (Figure 1) (Krug et al., 2002).

There is strong evidence that all four levels influence bullying behaviour. Differences in prevalence and type of bullying by individual characteristics such as age and gender have been exhaustively studied. We know for example, that girls are more likely to participate in relational aggression such as excluding the victim where as boys are more likely to display physical aggression.

Family relationships are also predictors of bullying behaviour and the impact of bullying. Rigby's studies demonstrate that adolescents from dysfunctional families in which there is relatively little caring between family members are much more likely to engage in bullying at school (Rigby, 1993, 1994). The parental attitudes that oppose bullying and encourage the maintenance of positive family relations appear to play a significant part in developing in children a propensity not to bully others, arguably because children in such families feel it is wrong (Rigby, 1997).

Community and societal level factors also influence childhood and youth bullying. Bullying behaviour is more common in communities with high level of violence. European research has shown that some ethnic and racial minorities experience high levels of racist bullying from the dominant culture (Motti-Stefanini et al., 2008; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002).

■ The Aboriginal context

Although definitive comparative prevalence studies have not been done, Australian Aboriginal children experience bullying at least as often and possibly more

often than non-Aboriginal children. Using different time references and different questions, a survey of Aboriginal children in Western Australia found that 31 percent of young people aged between 12 and 17 years old reported they had been bullied at school (Zubrick et al., 2005).

Aboriginal children experience a disproportionate degree of factors associated with greater levels of bullying. The consequences of historical dispossession of land and suppression of language and culture are all too apparent in contemporary Australian families. Forced removal of children from Aboriginal parents for most of the 20th century has resulted in cyclical patterns of frustration, disengagement from society and anger often mixed with alcohol and drug abuse (HREOC, 1997; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005). High rates of mortality, morbidity and incarceration (Aboriginal people are 21 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Aboriginal people in Western Australia) (ABS, 2010; Freemantle et al., 2004) mean that parents and especially male role models are missing from many families and communities. Domestic and family violence put some children at high risk (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2005). Disrupted families, location disadvantage and institutional racism result in Aboriginal people having lower levels of education, health and employment.

Despite these burdens, Aboriginal identity and culture are a source of strength. There is growing evidence that where cultural identity is strong and Aboriginal communities have effective education, health and employment services, the well-being of Aboriginal people, and especially children and youth is much better. Chandler and Lalonde have explored this extensively in the Canadian setting, finding that variables measuring community and cultural strength are associated with low rates of youth and adult suicide (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009).

■ Research questions and setting

The Aboriginal experience in Australia is diverse. Aboriginal people live in capital cities, regional centres, small towns and remote communities. The specific

history of interaction with Europeans from invasion and land dispossession, the assimilation policies including removal of children to the self-determination programs of the 1970s to 1990s varies between locations and language groups. This research is the first in Australia to explore how Aboriginal bullying is shaped by the individual, family, community and societal levels as in Figure 1. Given the diversity it was important to ground the study in a specific locality and cultural group but to include enough variability to be able to put forward some conclusions which could be tested in other settings.

Conducting a study in a particular locality is also an important strategy to ensure that principles of ethical Aboriginal research were followed. It is not acceptable for Aboriginal people to be the "subjects" of research. Ethical Aboriginal research requires Aboriginal control over the research questions, processes, and analysis, and about how the research results are used. This intense involvement can be most effectively achieved within a relatively confined area, allowing community leaders, parents and children to be involved and to benefit from the research. This study confined itself to one region, the midwest of Western Australia. This vast region covers 600,000 square kilometers and is comprised of several coastal towns and a large, sparsely settled inland. It has an estimated total population of 51,748 and an Aboriginal population of 7209 residing in one major regional centre of 35,000 and many other small towns and communities ranging from 9000 to fewer than 100 people (ABS, 2007-08). The midwest is the traditional country of the Yamaji people, a collective term for the language groups that belong to this region. English is widely spoken but there is still the preservation of Aboriginal language in the region, with the most widely spoken Aboriginal language being Wadjarri.

■ Methods

This paper is drawn from a larger Aboriginal community-based study called "Solid Kids Solid Schools" (SKSS). The SKSS study goal was to contextualise bullying behavior and translate this knowledge into community-owned strategies. The methodology incorporated best practice in research with Indigenous communities (Smith, 1999) and was approved by the appropriate university and Aboriginal ethics committees. Partnerships were formed with the Yamaji community at multiple levels to ensure appropriate ownership and representation (deCrespigny et al., 2004). Critical to this partnership was the formation of a regional Aboriginal Steering Group comprised of invited leaders from Midwest Aboriginal communities, including but not limited to individuals with expertise in education and health. This group provided advice on all aspects of the research from protocols for community engagement to interpretation and use of the results.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with primary and secondary school aged children, parents and other caregivers, community elders and Aboriginal Indigenous Education Officers (AIEOs) employed in the schools. In total 260 people participated, drawn from three towns selected by the steering group. These towns were the regional centre with a population of 30000, a rural coastal town with a population of 6000 and a remote inland town with less than 1000 residents. Respondents comprised 119 primary school students, 21 high school students, 40 parents and other caregivers, 18 elders and 60 AIEOs.

Children and youth were recruited from schools and a vocational education centre. Selected schools serving the three communities were invited to participate. The selection was based on the interest of the school and the desire to have a range of primary and secondary schools, including state, Catholic and residential. The 12 participating schools sent an information sheet and consent form home with each Aboriginal child. All children who returned a signed form were interviewed. This amounted to 198 Aboriginal children, or an estimated 15 percent of Aboriginal children enrolled in the schools. Adults were approached to be interviewed through local contacts and referrals by members of the steering group. In addition to individual interviews with AIEOs at the participating schools, information gathered from an interactive workshop on bullying held with about 60 AIEOs provided further insights.

Two female and one male Aboriginal research assistants were trained to conduct interviews and transcribe tapes. These workers had extensive contacts in one or more of the communities. Where possible, male researchers interviewed male respondents and females interviewed female respondents. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by an Aboriginal transcriber or the Aboriginal researchers. Transcripts of interviews with males were checked by a male Aboriginal researcher. Follow up with communities was another important part of the partnership. Information from interviews and focus groups were taken to representative groups for validation or further insights. More detail about how the study maintained cultural security is provided by Coffin (2008).

■ Instruments

Some questions were derived from an earlier unpublished study of bullying by Indigenous students (Trevaskis, 2003). The question lines were pilot tested for validity and appropriateness using a convenience sample that included male and female children from each age category, a male and female elder within the immediate community and an Aboriginal teacher and AIEO. Modifications were made to shorten and simplify the question line.

Students were asked about family and community connections, and general feelings related to enjoyable

and disliked aspects of school and community life. When children raised bullying spontaneously, they were asked about the frequency of bullying in their school, how they felt about children being bullied or bullying, if they personally bullied or were bullied and about the causes of bullying and what should be done to reduce this behaviour. Children who did not mention bullying unprompted were shown drawings depicting acts associated with bullying and then asked what they called it. The other questions about bullying followed. The structure of the adult question line was similar with an emphasis on community and family relationships, followed by the wider community. Adults were directly asked what the word bullying meant to them, how they responded to bullying to and by their children, what they thought were the causes of bullying and what should be done about it. Interviews with adults took approximately 40 minutes and interviews with children about 20-30 minutes.

■ Analysis

Interviews were entered into QSR NVIVO. To ensure respondent anonymity all interviewees were assigned an ID code using first names and numbers. Colaizzi's (1978) framework for data analysis was followed to ensure validity and to maintain the community ownership and engagement. Transcripts were read three times. At the third reading, common themes were extracted and included: (a) major events or phrases, (b) a summation of events and/or people by location, gender and role (c) examples of any emerging themes, (d) any negative responses or examples that contradict the researcher's ideas, and (e) a variation of any emerging themes. Meanings were then attached to the themes by creative insight (Colaizzi, 1978). The text was then re-examined for consistencies across gender, age, location and school type. Finally the refined meanings were placed within a socio-ecological framework. To ensure that bias from investigators was minimised an independent Aboriginal research assistant was employed to validate themes and to help validate the analysis. The Steering Committee also was invited to review and validate the interpretation of the results.

■ Results

Themes and meanings derived from the interviews are presented using the socio-ecological framework. First, the act of bullying, from respondents' perspectives is described, including behaviour, prevalence and differences by gender, age and Aboriginality. The influences on bullying are explored by examining first the effects of family, then the larger Aboriginal community including inter-family relations and finally the wider Australian society.

■ Characteristics of bullying in the Yamaji region

Bullying was a word that was widely understood by all children and adults in each community. A few adults in the smaller towns referred to it as a *wadjella* (white person) word, but they also explained they had a word with the same meaning in their language. When asked to describe bullying, people included all of the characteristics associated with bullying: prolonged or repeated behaviour such as "teasing", "picking on" or "hitting" by a more powerful person against a weaker, smaller or younger person.

■ Prevalence

Virtually all of the 128 students interviewed said that bullying happened at the school at least some of the time. Over 40 percent of primary school students said that they saw or experienced bullying every day or nearly every day. Secondary students did not report it as so common. Only 16 percent said it was a daily occurrence, but they still agreed that it happens "sometimes". Adults felt that bullying was part of childhood and happened everywhere.

■ Behaviours

All forms of bullying were raised in the interviews. Primary school students frequently described bullying as teasing. Physical aggression accompanied verbal and relational bullying among older students. For example, one Aboriginal woman described the escalation of bullying behavior by older high school girls:

... they usually start off by giving that kid dirty looks, I think to see their reaction. Then they start to sling off say a few little nasty things and then they start get worser, usually by now they have extra kids on their side and feeling tougher themselves, yeah then they um pretty continue on with the teasing and name calling, then as time goes on it gets worser and worser and eventually they end up hitting them and terrorising them for a couple of days (Female parent/caregiver, 31, inland remote community).

Many people interviewed said that bullying happened to the "smaller kids" who were *winyarn* (weak) or *ngardu* (someone with low self-esteem). However, a large proportion of children and adults specifically said that it was older children bullying younger children:

Well here at the school the big kids like in Year 6 and 7 pick on the little kids by bossing them to get the ball if it goes off the court or footy oval and if they don't get the ball for them they usually get really angry and start to hit the little kids (Male, 9, coastal remote)

Most adults expressed sympathy for the children who were victimised. The negative consequences of bullying that concerned them included poor school attendance and achievement, being frightened to go out of the home, a perpetuation of being victimised as they grew up, behaviour problems and risk of suicide.

Virtually all episodes of bullying discussed involved only Aboriginal children. The non-directive nature of the interviews meant that people could talk about any form of bullying. What people of all ages chose to discuss was bullying of Aboriginal children by other Aboriginal children, not by non-Aboriginal children. For example, one adult in the educational system said,

My son was in boarding school, he only lasted one term because of severe bullying by his own race ... His work started to drop (inland remote AIEO).

Even in the schools where Aboriginal students were a minority, they rarely mention bullying or being bullied by non-Aboriginal students. The only mention of bullying of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal children was by AIEOs from one primary school in the regional centre. The AIEOs reported there was very little bullying at their school and that what did happen involved non-Aboriginal children taunting Aboriginal children. However, children attending that school reported that bullying between Aboriginal students was relatively frequent.

■ Families' impact on bullying

Children and adults described many ways that families could protect children from bullying. One of the most direct forms of protection was older siblings or cousins who would either deter other children from bullying them or punish their bullies. Children without this protection felt more vulnerable.

However, bullying also occurred within families. Many children and adults talked about older siblings or cousins bullying younger relatives. As one man recalled:

Well I gotta confess that I was a bully, but only to my brothers and sisters oh and little cousins but I think it was because my older brothers and cousins picked on me a lot (Father, coastal town)

His comment brings up another way that bullying affects the family. Many adults and some children described that when children were bullied they would act up at home, being aggressive to everyone.

I know one of my sons when he been go school out there (residential school), every time he been come home for holidays he used to all the time belt em his brothers and sisters and play proper

rough ways. It wasn't until long time after I been find out what he been doing to this mob here, that bigger boys was doing to him at the [school] (Mother, remote town).

Most adults also felt that for some children, bullying behaviour was modelled at home through the behaviour of their older siblings, or by observing domestic violence. More than a few parents attributed the violent behaviour of their adult children on what they saw at home. While some people made a direct connection between domestic violence and bullying, others felt that it created an environment which normalised aggression and could result in children bullying others.

■ Parental responses to bullying

All parents and grandparents wanted to prevent their children from bullying others or being victimised. Adults said that they wanted to know if their child was bullying others. They said if that happened they would talk with their child about how it was wrong and that it could hurt others. It was also common for them to say that they would give the child "a good hiding" or other physical punishment to reinforce the message.

Similarly, parents said they would take action if their child was victimised. A common response to a child being bullied away from school, such as at the pool or shops, was to keep the child at home. Some parents also said they would keep a child home who was upset from being bullied at school "for a couple of days then when they right I send them back to school" (Grandmother, remote town).

While almost all parents said they would encourage the child to speak to a teacher or headmaster, most also said that they would personally talk to someone at the school as well. In the smaller towns, many parents added that they would tell the parents of students who bullied, but a few said that they would not do that because it would lead to fights between the families.

Adults viewed bullying by girls differently than they viewed that behaviour with boys. The general opinion was that bullying episodes lasted longer with girls and some girls were tormented by the effects of bullying for their life. Women were more likely to become involved when their daughters or granddaughters were bullied, and the risk of escalating arguments between women was great. Episodes of bullying with boys were seen to resolve more quickly; the best possible resolution was when the boy stood his ground and fought those who bullied him.

Well because the majority of my grandchildren are boys I tell them to give it right back to them. I know it's wrong but it the only way it gunna stop because when my other grannies was here on

they was getting picked on all the time. Anyway their mother and father went to the school and try to sort it out time and time again but nothing same kid kept picking on him hitting him and all that. Anyway it started to happen out of school hours you know around town and then anyway this one day he thought stuff it. He grabbed that boy and give him one good one and what you reckon they best friends today (elder from Regional Centre).

■ Community influences

Community is defined here as the wider group of Aboriginal people and families living or associated with the particular town or regional centre. Children and adults were asked what influences their community had on bullying. The answers were strong and consistent. Various behaviours in the community were seen as either directly resulting in more bullying or indirectly creating a climate in which aggression was normalised.

Children and adults from all three locations reported that violence in the community leads to an acceptance of that behaviour as normal. Parents and elders in the coastal and remote towns were particularly graphic in describing how often children were exposed to violence by people outside of the family. Even in the regional centre, many parents and children raised community violence as a reason for bullying, although others said they were able to avoid being exposed.

Parents described how, as children aged, they became accustomed to violence. Young children were frightened and frequently cried when they saw or heard it. However, as they grew older a normal pattern was for them to either ignore it, or to rush out to watch, discuss and even join in.

If they inside say watching DVD then they hear someone fighting they press pause and go and watch the fight have a good laugh and then go back inside and watch the movie like nothing happen (Father, coastal town).

A specific form of community violence is "feuding", a term used by Aboriginal people to describe entrenched tensions between family groups. Feuds often have their origins in a particular "wrong" which happened many years ago. Incidents of aggression between families can flare up at any time and underpin all interactions with all members of the opposing family, including children. There is a cultural obligation to defend one's family, which children feel very strongly. While this brings a sense of pride in doing the right thing for one's family it can also be a burden for children.

Feuding issues affect our kids by the way the learn in the classroom there is a distraction you know tensions between students so really the kids won't concentrate on their work properly (elder, Regional Centre)

Yes bullying is an issue in our community because what happens outside school is related and brought back from community issue into our school (AEIO, Regional Centre)

The immediate reasons children were bullied could reflect tensions within and between communities. For example, triggers for bullying included being from another area, being fair or very dark skinned/different looking to the norm, or socialising with different cultural groups especially non-Aboriginal children. Leaving a school or community is not necessarily a solution. Moving to a new town to go to school without family was also a risk factor for being bullied. In this study, the two residential schools had the greatest complaints about bullying from students. One of these schools had an exclusive Aboriginal student population and in the other school only 30 percent were Aboriginal.

■ Influence of the wider society

The themes raised by parents and children about the familial and community influences on bullying were almost identical in the three very different towns that were the part of this study. There was also consistency regarding the influences from the wider society. Adults in particular raised issues about systemic socio-economic disadvantage, lack of rural infrastructure and entrenched racism. These issues were not discussed in as much detail or with the same passion as parental and community influences, but they form a wider context which triggers bullying incidents and aggravates the harms caused by bullying.

■ Rural infrastructure

The close nature of Aboriginal communities, even within a regional city, leaves children with few opportunities to be at "peace" and feel safe. Bullying can happen anywhere. During the interviews children and adults often claimed bullying was caused by boredom. Parents regularly suggested that there should be more youth activities. These comments reflect the real lack of investment in recreational programs for Aboriginal children and youth. Although all of the towns had swimming pools and sports facilities, these rarely offered supervised activities. The bush tracks that lace most rural towns and used regularly by children are hidden from public view. These and other public settings become places where bullying occurs. This is why protective parents said

they kept their children at home, going out only to visit a relative:

I think that kids bully each other in areas that there is no one around to control the situation. I know that they bully at school but teachers can put a stop to it, but in areas where there is no teachers, Police, Security Guards or even shop attendants kids are most likely to be bullied (Mother, coastal town).

■ Racism

Even though inter-racial bullying was rarely discussed, this does not mean that racial tensions do not exist in the schools or communities or that racism is not relevant to understanding bullying in an Aboriginal context.

One way that racial tensions manifested themselves is through internalised racism. This occurs when Aboriginal children turned on other Aboriginal children for having non-Aboriginal friends, for having a light skin colour, or pronounced Aboriginal facial features or mannerisms. The victim is being punished for being Aboriginal, whether it is for being perceived as being too Aboriginal or not Aboriginal enough. This kind of bullying was mentioned by only a few respondents, mostly by adults remembering their childhood, however, racially-related taunts were probably part of the "teasing" and "picking on" that children discussed. One way children respond to such bullying is to separate oneself from non-Aboriginal children and to be as "Aboriginal" as possible.

Another way that racism manifested itself was by reinforcing the view that teachers did not listen to Aboriginal students when they told them about bullying or that they did nothing to stop this. The adults who had this opinion expressed it with considerable anger and bitterness, reflecting a lifetime of experiencing being let down by mainstream institutions.

Well I think that the parents need to let the teachers know that if a kid comes to see them then they should listen to them. I tell ya now my grannies and my kids too when they went to school always told me that the teachers would never listen to them they would always tell them to go along and play and leave it with them they will deal with it, but most of the time nothing. They don't even speak to the other kids, in the end but kids take it into their own hands and either just walk off from school or punch piss out of the other kids (Grandmother, coastal community).

Many children expressed the same view, for example "Tell teachers, but they don't listen. Tell Mum, she goes

and shouts at them (Male, Year 5, Regional centre primary school).

■ Discussion

Interviews with over 260 Aboriginal children and adults reveal that intra-racial bullying is pervasive in the Midwest of Western Australia. Children and adults point to family and community factors that perpetuate bullying. They also indirectly refer to the systemic inter-racial conflict in Australian society as another cause. The issues raised in the interviews reinforce recent research on the predictors of bullying and inter-personal violence in other disadvantaged populations (Hong, 2009; Merrell-James, 2006; Tummala-Narra, 2007). Other research also shows that bullying and associated aggression experienced in our three communities will result in profound negative outcomes.

■ Family influences

Bullying that happens within the family, between siblings, cousins and also parents, provides opportunities for Aboriginal children to learn and practice these behaviours. Children and adults indicated that it was "normal" for older kids to bully younger kids and many described bullying between siblings or cousins as a regular occurrence. Research from Israel has found that children who were victimised by siblings were far more likely to be the victims of bullying at school and to exhibit behavioural problems (Wolke & Samara, 2004). The authors note that school based strategies need to take into account children's experiences at home.

Some of the parenting styles described in the interviews are not conducive to Aboriginal children feeling safe and being able to express their problems (Hong, 2009; Merrell-James, 2006; Zubrick et al., 2005.). Many parents and caregivers seemed to be encouraging or modeling violence or physical punishment. A common sentiment was that children, and particularly boys, should stand up for themselves by fighting back when they encountered bullying. Many adults also said that they would deal with reports that their child bullied others by using physical punishment. The international evidence is conclusive that parental use of corporal punishment increases the likelihood that children will exhibit behaviour problems including aggression and bullying (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). However, at least one researcher has found that parental encouragement to respond to situations with aggression was not associated with children's greater support of violence, physical fighting or bullying others or being bullied (Ohene et al., 2006). It appears to be the direct application of physical punishment on the child and not general admonishments to be strong and fight that encourage children to be aggressive to others.

According to the adults interviewed, some of the children in the study communities are exposed to chronic trauma. This exposure increases the likelihood they will have learning difficulties, display aggression, and be withdrawn and, later, to be at high risk of alcohol or drug misuse, interpersonal violence and criminal offending, and mental and physical health problems (Harris et al., 2007). Categories of defined trauma include being victimised or an observer of psychological, physical or sexual abuse; violence against the mother; living with a household member who abused substances, was suicidal or mentally ill, or was ever imprisoned; absence of one or both parents; and physical or emotional neglect. Not only do Aboriginal children have a greater likelihood of experiencing one or more of these types of trauma than non-Aboriginal Australian children, their parents' own experience of trauma as children impact on their capacity to care for their children, putting that child at cyclic risk interpersonal violence and bullying (Windisch et al., 2003; Zubrick et al., 2005.).

Some parents and caregivers told us they were successful in creating homes that were free of violence and other trauma. They described how no violence was allowed at their house and how they would keep their children from places or people known to be violent. However, at least one study suggests that protective parents who do not support violence are not effective in preventing bullying or other interpersonal violence by their children if the school and community environment is violent (Brookmeyer et al., 2006).

■ Influences of the Aboriginal community

Outside of the family, the actions and attitudes of the Aboriginal community also affect children's behaviour. The Aboriginal people interviewed consistently identified the high levels of violence in the community, as well as alcohol and drug use, as reasons why bullying occurs. Empirical evidence and psychological theory support their views. Exposure to violence in childhood and adolescence is associated with reduced empathy and more frequent displays of interpersonal violence (Sans & Truscott, 2004). Recent studies have observed that Indigenous people were 2 to 3 times more likely to be victimised than non-Indigenous Australian and, for some types of offenses like assault, over 20 times more likely to be apprehended (Bryant & Willis, 2008; Wundersitz, 2010). The over-whelming majority of offences were intra-racial. Alcohol was also involved in a very high proportion of cases.

When violence escalates until it becomes an issue between families, our respondents told us that children were drawn into the conflict. Fortunately, several of the adults interviewed resisted such behaviour and were actively keeping their children and wider family from becoming involved. For example, one woman said,

I don't use family feuding. This kind of behaviour in [our town] is called criminal behavior. Payback is a traditional form of punishment not practiced in this area. Use of this type of language makes the behavior acceptable and perpetrates the myth that violence is part of Aboriginal Culture (Mother, regional centre)

Promising strategies to reduce violence have been implemented world-wide. The most relevant for the communities in this study are a combination of primary prevention and targeted interventions (Krug et al., 2002). Primary prevention involves social marketing of anti-violence messages, proactive policing and design of public spaces. Targeted interventions would involve working directly with Aboriginal community leaders to address issues through mediation and diversion programs for youth. In the interviews it was clear that the Aboriginal community recognises the damage that violence and bullying is causing. Intensive local efforts with the support of community leaders may be enough to reduce the level of violence, bringing profound benefits to children.

■ Wider social influences

The influence of Aboriginal people living in a wider Australian society cannot be ignored. Previous research among inner city African American youth in the United States suggests that interpersonal violence may result from a combination of environmental stressors, racial identity problems, and health and mental health problems (Whaley, 1992). Similar environmental and social stressors and health problems have been found among Australian Aboriginal children and the communities in which they reside (Zubrick et al., 2005). These have their root causes in the history of colonisation and subsequent policies of assimilation and welfare dependency.

It is not a coincidence that the highest levels of reported bullying were in the more isolated and remote towns. These communities lack access to employment, transport and services such as counseling and other mental health support. Limited economic opportunities result in cycles of poverty that create jealousy within the Aboriginal community related to material possessions such as clothing, shoes, electronic equipment, school choice and even friend choices. These "possessions" are often scrutinised and if they are deemed by the perpetrator to not be "Aboriginal" enough, the person is targeted. Social determinants, such as low social economic status create division and difference which contribute to the bullying behavior.

Racial violence and oppression are typically experienced across generations and become both a personal and shared experience (Tummala-Narra, 2007). The Yamaji region has been affected by many of the same forces of reduced farm and station

employment and increased welfare dependency that has been described for the Kimberley region in northwest Western Australia. Hunter (1991) has argued that these forces directly resulted in increased rates of mental illness and suicide for the children of the first generation to experience those changes. The children in this study are their grandchildren. Several of the adults in this study discussed the personal impact of intergenerational effects.

Well I love my kids but I'm a drunk today, I was bullied at school and now I'm in a (expletive) relationship my man abuses me which I feel is still bullying. I hate my life I wanna get out but what can I do, I have all these kids to think of and look another on the way yeah it's all pretty (expletive), so I am the perfect example of how a victim of bullying turns out (Mother, coastal town).

Another way that inter-racial tensions are manifest is in the relationships between schools and the Aboriginal communities. Children and adults complained that teachers did not "listen" when children said they were being bullied. Even the schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students were viewed as mainstream institutions which were unfamiliar with Aboriginal community issues. It is very likely that the situation in the schools in this study was similar to that described by Merrell-James (2006, p. 283) who argued that intra-racial bullying among African-Americans is perpetuated, in part, by "adults who ignore bullying as too commonplace to bother with or who dismiss intra-racial bullying as nonexistent".

Conclusion

The strength of this study is its in-depth examination of the context in which Aboriginal bullying occurs in one region of Australia. As numerous researchers have observed, responding to bullying and other child mental health issues requires an understanding of the multiple levels which influence behaviour (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009; Hong, 2009; Tummala-Narra, 2007). Without context understandings can only be superficial (Hunter, 2007). Bullying behaviour among children may be universal but the factors that perpetuate and protect are unique to each setting. They involve the characteristics of families, the community dynamics and the wider socio-economic context which, in this case, has been shaped by centuries of institutional racism towards Aboriginal Australians.

Solutions to minimising bullying can start with behaviour in the classrooms and school yards, but this will not be sufficient until the inter-generational impacts of trauma and disadvantage can be undone through support to parents and other caregivers. Aboriginal communities also need to consciously reject violence

and the wider society needs to take its responsibilities of addressing systemic Indigenous disadvantage.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2007-08). *Regional population growth - Australia*. Canberra, ACT: ABS.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2010). *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*. Canberra, ACT: ABS.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2005). *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*. Canberra, ACT: AIHW and Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Berger, K. S. (2007). Update on bullying at school: Science forgotten? *Developmental Review*, 27, 90-126.
- Brookmeyer, K. A., Fanti, K. A., & Henrich, C. C. (2006). Schools, parents and youth violence: a multilevel, ecological analysis. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 35(4), 504-514.
- Bryant, C., & Willis, M. (2008). *Risk factors in Indigenous violent victimisation*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Chandler, M., & Lalonde, C. (2009). Cultural continuity as a moderator of suicide risk among Canada's First Nations. In L. Kirmayer & G. Valaskakis (Eds.), *The mental health of Canadian Aboriginal peoples: Transformations, identity, and community* (pp. 221-248). Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press.
- Coffin, J. (2008). Embedding cultural security in bullying prevention research. *Manifestation: Journal of Community Engaged Research and Learning Partnerships* 1(1), 66-81.
- Colaizzi, P. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist view it. In R. Valle & M. King (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 48-71). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Craven, R., & Bodkin-Andrews, G. (2006). New solutions for addressing Indigenous mental health; A call to counsellors to introduce the new positive psychology of success. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 16(1), 41-54.
- deCrespigny, C., Emden, C., Kowanko, I., & Murray, H. (2004). A 'partnership model' for ethical Indigenous research. *Collegian*, 11(4), 7.
- Farrington, D. P. (1993). Understanding and preventing bullying. In M. Tonny & N. Morris (Eds.), *Crime and Justice* (Vol. 17). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fitzpatrick, K., Dulin, A., & Piko, B. (2010). Bullying and depressive symptomatology among low-income African-American youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39, 634-645.
- Forero, R., McLellan, L., Rissel, C., & Bauman, A. (1999). Bullying behaviour and psychological health among school students in New South Wales, Australia: Cross sectional survey. *British Medical Journal*, 319(7206), 344-348.
- Freemantle, J., Stanley, F., Read, A., & de Klerk, N. (2004). *Patterns and trends in mortality of Western Australian infants, children and young people, 1980-2002*. Perth, WA: Advisory Council on the Prevention of Deaths of Children and Young People.
- Gershoff, E. T., & Bitensky, S. H. (2007). The case against corporal punishment of children: converging evidence from social science research and international human rights law and implications for US public policy. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 13(4), 231-272.

- Griffin Smith, R., & Gross, A. M. (2006). Bullying; Prevalence and the effect of age and gender. *Child and Behaviour Therapy*, 28(4), 13-37.
- Hansen, K. L., Melhus, M., Hogmo, A., & Lund, E. (2008). Ethnic discrimination and bullying in the Sami and non-Sami populations in Norway: the SAMINOR study. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 67(1), 99-115.
- Harris, W. W., Lieberman, A. F., & Marans, S. (2007). In the best interests of society. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 48(3/4), 392-411.
- Hong, J. S. (2009). Feasibility of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in low-income schools. *Journal of School Violence*, 8(1), 81-97.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). (1997). *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Hunter, E. (1991). The social and family context of Aboriginal self-harmful behaviour in remote Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 25, 203-209.
- Hunter, E. (2007). Disadvantage and discontent: A review of issues relevant to the mental health of rural and remote Indigenous Australians. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 15, 88-93.
- Kochenderfer, B. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1996a). Peer victimization: Cause or consequence of school maladjustment. *Child Development*, 67, 1305-1317.
- Kochenderfer, B. J., & Ladd, G. W. (1996b). Peer victimization: Manifestations and relations to school adjustment in kindergarten. *Journal of School Psychology*, 34(3), 267-283.
- Krug, E., Dahlberg, L., Mercy, J., Zwi, A., & Lozano, R. (2002). *Violence-a global public health problem*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
- Kumpulainen, K., Rasanen, E., Henttonen, I., Almqvist, F., Kresanov, K., Linna, S., et al. (1998). Bullying and psychiatric symptoms among elementary school-age children. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 22(7), 705-717.
- Maxim Institute. (2006). *Current issues in Maori schooling*. Retrieved 15 May 2009, from www.maxim.org.nz/files/pdf/policy_paper_maori_education.pdf.
- Merrell-James, R. (2006). *Intra-racial bullying: An issue of multicultural counseling. Persistently safe schools 2006: Collaborating with students, families, and communities* (pp. 295-298). Retrieved 15 May, 2009, from <http://www.hamfish.org/>.
- Motti-Stefanini, F., Pavlopoulos, V., Obradovi, J., SDalla, M., Takis, N., & Papathanassiou, A. (2008). Immigration as a risk factor for adolescent adaptation in Greek urban schools. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 5, 315-335.
- Ohene, S.-A., Ireland, M., Clea, M., & Borowsky, I. W. (2006). Parental expectations, physical punishment, and violence among adolescents who scored positive on a psychosocial screening test in primary care. *Pediatrics*, 117(2), 441-447.
- Olweus, D. (1994). Bullying at school: Basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 35(7), 1171-1190.
- Rigby, K. (1993). School children's perceptions of their families and parents as a function of peer relations. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 154(4), 501-513.
- Rigby, K. (1994). Psychosocial functioning in families of Australian adolescent schoolchildren involved in bully/victim problems. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 16, 173-187.
- Rigby, K. (1997). Attitudes and beliefs about bullying among Australian school children. *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 18(2), 202-220.
- Rigby, K. (1997). What children tell us about bullying in schools. *Children Australia*, 22(2), 28-34.
- Rigby, K. (1999). Peer victimisation at school and the health of secondary school students. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 69, 95-104.
- Rigby, K. (2000). Effects of peer victimization in schools and perceived social support on adolescent well-being. *Journal of Adolescence*, 23, 57-68.
- Rigby, K., & Slee, P. (1991). Bullying among Australian school children: Reported behavior and attitudes toward victims. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 131(5), 615-627.
- Sans, D. P., & Truscott, S. D. (2004). Empathy, exposure to community violence and use of violence among urban, at-risk adolescents. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 33(1), 33-50.
- Slee, P. (1994). Situational and interpersonal correlates of anxiety associated with peer victimisation. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 25(2), 97-107.
- Slee, P. (1995). Bullying: health concerns of Australian secondary school students. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 5, 215-224.
- Slee, P., & Rigby, K. (1993). Australian school children's self appraisal of interpersonal relations: The bullying experience. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 23(4), 273-281.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Trevaskis, G. (2003). *The Friendly Schools Bullying Intervention Project: Adapting resources for use in remote Indigenous school settings*. Unpublished Masters, Curtin University of Technology, Perth.
- Tummala-Narra, P. (2007). Conceptualizing trauma and resilience across diverse contexts. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*, 14(1), 33-53.
- Verkuyten, M., & Thijs, J. (2002). Racist victimization among children in The Netherlands: the effect of ethnic group and school. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25(2), 310-331.
- Whaley, A. L. (1992). A culturally sensitive approach to the prevention of interpersonal violence among urban black youth. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 84(7), 585-588.
- Williams, K., Chambers, M., Logan, S., & Robinson, D. (1996). Association of common health symptoms with bullying in primary school children. *British Medical Journal*, 313, 17-19.
- Windisch, L. E., Jenvey, V. B., & Drysdale, M. (2003). Indigenous parents' ratings of the importance of play, Indigenous games and language, and early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28(3), 50-56.
- Wolke, D., & Samara, M. M. (2004). Bullied by siblings: association with peer victimisation and behaviour problems in Israeli lower secondary school children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45(5), 1015-1029.
- Wundersitz, J. (2010). *Indigenous perpetrators of violence: prevalence and risk factors for offending*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology.
- Zubrick, S., Silburn, S., Gurrin, C., Teo, H., Shephard, C., & Carlton, J. (1997). *Western Australian Child Health Survey: Education, Health and Competence*. Perth, WA: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Zubrick, S., Silburn, S., Lawrence, D., Mitrou, F., Dalby, R., Blair, E., et al. (2005). *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people*. Perth, WA: Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

■ About the authors

Juli Coffin is an Aboriginal woman from the Pilbara region in Western Australia. She has a background in education, health and preservation of Aboriginal languages. She is an Associate Professor in Aboriginal health and is due to complete her PhD by the end of 2010. Juli has worked at CUCRH for 12 years running many research projects and building research capacity among her own people and others around her. Juli has published in the area of cultural security and racism issues.

Ann Larson is a social demographer and population health researcher with a passion for addressing health inequity. Her research interests include the health effects of racism and methodologies to evaluate the impact of health and social programs. She was the inaugural director of Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health from 1999 to 2009.

Donna Cross is the Foundation Professor of Child and Adolescent Health in the School of Exercise Biomedical and Health Sciences, Edith Cowan University in Western Australia and Director of the Child Health Promotion Research Centre.