Introduction

This paper develops the thinking on school bullying using a sociocultural theoretical framework. This framework views bullying as contextual and focuses attention to the situated relationships and multiple settings that surround the behaviour. The paper reviews existing literature on school bullying around three main themes: (i) the conceptualisation and interpretation of bullying; (ii) the relational aspects of bullying; and (iii) bullying as part of someone's life trajectory. It contains a discussion of empirical findings highlighting key issues. It presents arguments from relevant sociocultural theories providing insight in each case.

Whilst there is a proliferation of empirical research on bullying that has helped in understanding its nature, characteristics, and the experiences of those involved, the authors argue that there has been less emphasis on providing a coherent theoretical underpinning to help integrate and explain complex research findings.

The roots of sociocultural approaches are found in Vygotsky's (1978) work which views development as shaped by the contexts in which individuals are based, and the social and interactional relations that exist between them. More recently it has been argued that sociocultural theory not only provides a mechanism for understanding cognitive development in interaction, but also social and emotional learning through shared cultural school spaces with peers and teachers. Mediation was a central tenet of Vygotsky's work, a process whereby the individual and the social mutually shape each other.

The potential of sociocultural approaches has already been touched on in some bullying literature through a focus on ecological frameworks. However, the existing reviews of bullying literature using the ecological model tend to focus on the multiple levels that risk and protective factors might operate on, as they contribute to bullying involvement.

The incorporation of sociocultural frameworks which look at how meaning is developed, negotiated, and resolved would be an additional resource to the study of school bullying. To illustrate this premise, the authors take three main themes within the research literature on school bullying: (i) the conceptualisation and interpretation of bullying, (ii) the relational aspects of bullying, and (iii) bullying as part of someone's life trajectory. In each case they describe findings from research in the area and illustrate how sociocultural perspectives can assist in understanding these reported findings.
The conceptualisation and interpretation of bullying

Whilst the widely agreed definition of bullying in the academic literature is that it involves repeated aggressive behaviour directed towards someone with less power, with the intention of causing them harm (Rigby & Smith, 2011), research has highlighted that this definition is not shared, or does not necessarily suit, the complex setting of the school community. Researchers have found students and teachers hold quite different concepts of bullying as do students of different ages.

A key aspect of sociocultural approaches is the focus on the situated nature of behaviour, and how it is socially constituted. Taking this viewpoint, what is classed as bullying is based on an interpretation of the situation in which the activity occurs rather than being based on an objective phenomenon that translates equally across settings. Teachers, when faced with a potential bullying situation, will interpret it through a dynamic process affected by previous experiences of similar situations, their knowledge of and relationship with the children involved, what they think bullying is, organisational climate in the school and many other factors. Similarly, children also have complex ways of both defining and responding to bullying based on multiple considerations including perceptions about the seriousness of the situation, their relationship with those involved, felt emotions, and social hierarchy in the peer group.

The role of context, and indeed history, is a fundamental part of looking at a phenomena using sociocultural theory. For example, early work on bullying tended to focus on physical and verbal bullying and it was only in the 1990s where indirect and relational forms of bullying were fully recognised. The growth of technology has since opened up new typologies of bullying using cyberspace.

The relational aspects of bullying

There has been recent exploration in psychological literature of bullying as a group-based phenomenon where bullying behaviours can be explained by peer-group norms around aggressive behaviour. Other studies show that bullying can occur within friendship groups, challenging traditional notions that bully-victim relationships are distinct from friendships. Rather than bullies and victims associating with separate peer groups, with contact between them mainly involving the bullying behaviour itself, research suggests that bullying is part of a continuum of interpersonal relationships that exist within the peer group where individuals may assume different roles at different times.

In support of this, studies of children's behaviour during incidents illustrate that bullying is a situated, collective behaviour involving the peer group as a whole. Bullying involves more individuals than the child being bullied and the bully, particularly because the majority of incidents occur in social situations in front of witnesses. Salmivalli et al.'s (1996) early work on participant roles shifted attention away from the bully-victim dyad and towards recognition that bullying was far more complex.

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Research findings suggest that children’s behaviour in bullying incidents may fluctuate depending on the situation, and sociocultural approaches recognise there is always a temporal dimension to our actions. From this perspective, social relationships are transactional and dialogical, with shifts occurring in the relationships between people rather than remaining static.

Research has examined motives behind bystander behaviour and why children might choose to intervene or not in bullying incidents that they witness. A range of considerations were reported, including their relationship to the child being bullied, who was involved, perceived responsibility, feelings of empathy or distressing emotions, and how serious the incident was judged to be. Relative status in the peer group was also found to be a factor influencing decisions to intervene. Children make complex decisions about if and how to respond based on an array of personal and situational factors.

Qualitative analysis of pupils' bullying accounts revealed ritualistic elements of bullying that strengthened peer group belonging. It also served to establish and recreate culturally valued ideas and characteristics by targeting individuals who were identified as ‘different’ to the peer group. The essence of having a shared enterprise (in these cases, responses to bullying) brings the community together, but also presents an opportunity for members to negotiate ways of being.

**Bullying as part of someone's life trajectory**

Research on children involved in bullying suggests that certain children are more likely to engage in bullying behaviours, or experience being victimized. In other words, characteristics of a child make it more likely that bullying will form part of their life course. Sociocultural perspectives would talk about identity positioning rather than personal characteristics because the framework supposes that people show changeable identity positions across different contexts and over time.

From a sociocultural theoretical perspective, people draw on the past, intentionally and unintentionally, to inform their current and future practices. Children who have been bullied or bullied others have been exposed to and learnt particular forms of interacting with others. This internalisation of knowledge and meanings from past experiences could be used to mediate new encounters. Firstly, this might explain how and why someone's bullying experiences in one context (such as at school) can be reproduced in another (such as a different school or the workplace). Secondly, this helps explain how and why the effects of bullying on psychological and behavioural processes can be longstanding for an individual.

There is increasing interest in the literature about victim resilience, and understanding how and why some children seem to be able to cope better and experience fewer effects than others. Identities are constantly re-negotiated, which may lead to previous identities being reproduced in new settings, but also allows for re-creations to take place along the way.
Implications and conclusions

A key implication for work on school bullying is that sociocultural perspectives force us to move our attention away from the individual bully-victim dyad, and focus more on the contextual, historical and institutional influences that surround the behaviour. Part of this involves assigning greater responsibility to others with whom children interact, and challenging community–based norms which may normalise certain forms of aggressive behaviours or interactive styles.

Less reliance on individualised, blame-based or punitive methods of addressing bullying is recommended along with greater consideration of the contextual factors surrounding individuals which result in particular patterns of behaviour. This means shifting attention away from seeking to isolate particular variables that may lead someone to engage in bullying or be bullied, and instead recognising the wider influences that interact together to create bullying in a particular situation. There is a need to understand what triggers might be important for initiating particular patterns of behaviour, interactions or responses in specific circumstances, and what conditions might inhibit such practices. Further study of the reciprocal interactions between people as part of their membership of multiple and intersecting communities is needed, as is recognition of the important role of identity through participation and ongoing meaning making.

The most effective school-based interventions are those which adopt approaches operating at a whole-school level, classroom level, and individual level, whilst also involving parents and the wider community. The reasons why such sophisticated programs have been the most successful are likely due to the way they address the multi-layered influences operating in children's experience, and recognise the various contexts in which they participate.

The culture of the school exerts a strong link on the amount of bullying that occurs between members of that community (including pupils, teachers and within staff teams). Therefore, “bullying needs to be seen embedded within the culture of the organization where it is taking place and in order to reduce its prevalence, we need to focus on changing the system rather than the individuals within it” (Monks et al., 2009, p154). This, in the authors’ view, is best achieved when a sociocultural perspective is adopted in order to understand, explain and address school bullying.