

# Understanding bullying from a shame management perspective: Findings from a three-year follow-up study

Eliza Ahmed

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## Abstract

*This study investigates bullies, victims and bully/victims who moved out of these roles over a three-year period in terms of their socially adaptive shame management skills and examines how such skills differ from those who remained stable in their bullying status. Data were collected from 32 schools in the Australian Capital Territory (1996 and 1999). The sample consisted of 365 students (48 per cent boys) who participated at two time points. Occupying a bully role in primary school was the most significant risk for continuing in the role in secondary school (51 per cent). Of the participants in 1996, 46 per cent of the non-bullies/non-victims, 40 per cent of the bullies/victims and 31 per cent of the victims remained stable in 1999. To test the importance of shame management in relation to the stability and variability in bullying roles, a modified version of the MOSS-SASD (Management of Shame State: Shame Acknowledgement and Shame Displacement) instrument was used. As expected, desisted bullies showed a significant inclination toward shame acknowledgement – the most adaptive form of managing shame. In support of shame management theory, non-bullies/non-victims who maintained their bullying-free status three years later also continued to manage shame adaptively (high shame acknowledgement and less shame displacement). The implications of these results for the future development of bullying interventions are discussed.*

THE STUDY of bullying behaviour has become an important domain of research in the criminology and psychology literature. The destructive consequences of bullying in schools have sparked concern for students' safety and well-being during the past two decades (e.g. Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1992; Rigby, 2002). Of greater concern is the accumulated evidence showing that bullying is not something that children 'naturally' grow out of (e.g. Boulton & Smith, 1994; Pelligrini & Bartini, 2000; Salmivalli *et al.*, 1998). Despite an increased awareness of the immediate and long-term detrimental effects of bullying, studies examining how and why those occupying a bullying role change to adopt a non-bully/non-victim role are scarce. This study addresses this gap in the literature on bullying by examining whether shame management provides a useful explanatory theoretical framework for understanding the stability and variability of children's bullying status (bully, victim, bully/victim and non-

bully/non-victim) across a three-year time-span (1996–9). It attempts to determine to what extent the shame management skills of acknowledgement and displacement can be proposed as potential explanations for why some continue to take on bullying roles while others do not.

The fact that some children completely refrain from bullying poses a significant question in its own right: why is it that these children learn to successfully negotiate conflict and maintain constructive relationships with others? A restorative justice framework is illuminating in this context because, unlike other frameworks, it emphasises the building of emotional resources and social connectedness between offenders, victims and their communities. As previous studies (Ahmed, 2001; Bowers *et al.*, 1994) have shown, bullying/victimisation in children occurs as a result of both an emotional and a social drift away from significant others. The present study maintains that an important aspect of bullying is the way children tackle each

others' shame and related feelings when something amiss happens. In particular, it examines the extent to which stability or variability in the pattern of bullying is associated with children's capacity to manage shame following an incident when one child visibly and unmistakably hurt the other.

## Background

### *Shame management and its relevance to curbing bullying*

From a restorative justice perspective, individuals who are unable to feel shame or remorse for harming others will be at greater risk of doing so in the future (Braithwaite, 1989, 2001: for a review see Harris, in press). This idea has been tested by the Life at School project research team through a series of empirical studies (e.g. Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Braithwaite *et al.*, 2003; Morrison, 2005, forthcoming; Murphy, in press) which have delineated different styles of shame management: shame acknowledgement and shame displacement. Shame acknowledgement is an admission that what has happened is wrong and shameful, and involves expressing remorse; shame displacement, by contrast, takes the form of blaming others for the wrong and expressing anger towards them.

Shame management theory (see Ahmed *et al.*, 2001) purports to explain how the management of shame feelings influences bullying behaviour. Shame management theory posits that individuals who acknowledge shame and accept personal responsibility will refrain from further wrongdoing because they have considered its harmful consequences and will make efforts to avoid them in the future. In contrast, dismissing shame feelings by blaming others will amplify wrongdoing because personal actions and consequences are dissociated. This argument has received empirical support from a number of studies which have shown that shame acknowledgement is associated with lower levels of bullying, while shame displacement (anger, blaming and other externalising reactions) is associated with higher levels of bullying (Ahmed, 2001; Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006; Ahmed &

J. Braithwaite, 2005, in press; Braithwaite *et al.*, 2003).

In this vein, Ahmed (2001) has also demonstrated that children in different bullying roles manage their shame differently. Non-bullies/non-victims are more likely to acknowledge shame and not displace it into anger. In contrast, bullies tend to displace shame through externalising blame and anger, with little acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Victims tend to internalise shame, that is, their feelings of others' rejection overwhelms them so that they do not feel worthy in others' eyes. Children who are both bullies and victims unfortunately combine the less adaptive side of both shame management styles. On one hand, they internalise shame and feel angry with themselves without focusing on the consequences, and on the other hand, they displace, directing blame and anger toward others.

Over the years, the research team has been involved in a series of studies (e.g. Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2005; Harris, 2001; Morrison, forthcoming; Shin, 2006) which have provided justification for extending shame management theory. In the initial study in 1996, victims had higher scores than non-bullies/non-victims on internalising shame because they were very sensitive to others' rejection (the item was 'Would you think others would reject you?'). This was the only component distinguishing victims from other groups, particularly from non-bullies/non-victims. This result motivated us to explore the issue in more depth, and we added an extra question to measure 'internalising shame' in the 1999 follow-up study: 'Would you hate yourself in this situation?' This question was conceptualised as referring to the kind of shame response that Tangney (1990) has investigated at some length and occurs when children with a poor sense of their own self-worth and a poor knowledge of what is acceptable find themselves socially ostracised by their peers.

More recently, the research team has developed and tested a new dimension of shame management skills, namely shame avoidance. The inclusion of this fourth dimension completes the process of devel-

oping shame management theory in a way that handles Nathanson's (1992) work on the compass of shame feelings which are not adaptive from the perspective of interpersonal relationships. Nathanson's 'withdrawal' and 'attack self' connect with shame management by internalising the feelings, 'attack other' connects by shame displacement, and 'avoidance' connects by shame avoidance.

Shame avoidance is understood as an array of shame reactions which are used to divert attention away from an uncomfortable situation that is psychologically threatening to the afflicted individual. Rather than a direct and constructive engagement with the situation, shame avoidance reactions are used to block out any anticipated problem by pretending that there is nothing wrong (items measuring shame avoidance are given in a later section). The present study is exploratory in that it examines the potential relevance of shame avoidance to the bullying context.

#### *Stability of bullying roles*

A large body of research has been dedicated to addressing the issue of bullying/victimisation among schoolchildren. A handful of studies have attempted to estimate stability of bullying roles, demonstrating high to moderate persistence of behaviour over time (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Pelligrini & Bartini, 2000; Salmivalli *et al.*, 1998; Sourander *et al.*, 2000). Reports place stability in the role of bully at 47 per cent (e.g. Sourander *et al.*, 2000). Somewhat conflicting findings, however, have emerged specifically for the stability of the victim role. Estimates vary from 90 per cent (Sourander *et al.*, 2000) to as low as 9 per cent (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

These conflicting findings in the stability of bullying/victimisation very probably reflect the methodological differences between the studies. For example, some have used a long assessment period (e.g. Paul & Cillessen, 2003; Schwartz *et al.*, 2001), whereas others (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996) have used a short period, such as a school term. Other major methodological issues include variation in the age of partici-

pants (i.e. preschoolers in the studies by Kochenderfer & Ladd (1996) and Monks *et al.*, Smith & Swettenham (2003) and sixth to eighth graders in the study by Salmivalli *et al.*, 1998) and in data collection procedures (for details, see Camodeca *et al.*, 2002). The application of different cut-off points in classifying the different bullying roles also deserves to be mentioned. Classification results are not well matched across studies as some have used a cut-off point of 1 or .50 standard deviation above the sample mean (Marini *et al.*, in press), whereas others have used 85th percentile of the bullying and victimisation scales (Camodeca *et al.*, 2002; Perry *et al.*, 1988).

Notwithstanding these inconsistent results, researchers agree on the urgency of understanding the reasons behind the stability of children's bullying roles at school. Unfortunately, most studies do not include all the parties in their long-term investigations, so that comparisons are at best partial. Some studies excluded non-involved children (e.g. Juvonen *et al.*, 2003; Schafer *et al.*, 2005), while others focused on the bullying trajectory of involved children (e.g. Seals & Young, 2003). To gain a complete picture of the stability among different bullying roles, we need to study those who are affected by the problem (victims, bullies and bullies/victims) as well as those who can escape from the problem (i.e. non-bullies/non-victims) over time.

Despite the theoretical and empirical importance of this topic, few studies have focused on how children in bully, victim and non-involved roles might carry distinctive psychological and developmental trajectories. The present study, therefore, seeks to extend the existing research by examining the pattern of shame management skills that characterises and differentiates groups of children who change their bullying status during the transition from primary school to secondary school, and to compare these children with those who remained free of bullying activities. It does so with the inclusion of children involved as well as those who were not involved in bullying problems in the Australian context.

## The present study

The present study builds on the initial study conducted in 1996, and aims to provide a longitudinal evaluation of the relationship between shame management and children's bullying status through the collection of comparable data in 1999. It posits that socially non-adaptive shame management strategies are important risk factors for the persistence of bullying/victimisation in some children. It examines the shame management skills that change as children embroiled in a bullying culture (stable bullies, stable victims and stable bullies/victims) move into the non-bully/non-victim peer group. Once we understand the cognitive and emotional skills implicated in a shift out of the bully/victim role, successful bullying interventions can be developed to promote these skills in children.

The data for children who took part in the survey in both 1996 and 1999 ( $N = 365$ ) examined the stability in children's bullying status (bully, victim, bully/victim, non-bully/non-victim) across a three-year time span with a specific focus on documenting these children's shame management skills. It is of particular interest to look at the following three pairs of groups in relation to their shame management skills over time:

1. *Hypotheses for stable bullies (1996 and 1999) versus desisted bullies*: previous studies have shown that bullies are less likely to show socially adaptive shame management skills when caught doing something wrong. It is, therefore, expected that desisted bullies – those who moved from bullies (1996) to non-bullies/non-victims (1999) – would be more likely to take on socially adaptive skills such as high shame acknowledgement and/or low shame displacement than stable bullies (hypothesis 1).
2. *Hypotheses for stable victims (1996 and 1999) versus desisted victims*: when victims do something wrong, they are likely to internalise shame through viewing others' rejection. It is, therefore, expected that desisted victims who have

moved from victim (1996) to non-bully/non-victim (1999) would be less likely to show internalising shame than stable victims (hypothesis 2).

3. *Hypotheses for stable bully/victim (1996 and 1999) versus desisted bully/victim*: in previous studies, bullies/victims were found to capture the non-adaptive shame reactions of both bullies and victims. Hence, it is expected that the desisted bully/victim who moved from bully/victim (1996) to non-bully/non-victim (1999) would show less shame displacement, less shame avoidance, and more shame acknowledgement than stable bullies/victims (hypothesis 3).

One approach to bullying intervention is to give the involved children the resources they need to move outside the bullying culture. In order to provide involved children with an effective anti-bullying skills set, it is important to look at non-involved children. For this reason, this study compares the shame management skills of stable non-bullies/non-victims and those non-bullies/non-victims who shifted to the bullying group three years later. It is expected that those who shifted from non-bully/non-victim to the bullying group would score low on shame acknowledgement and high on shame displacement as well as on shame avoidance (hypothesis 4).

## Method

### Sample

This paper is based on a longitudinal study conducted over an interval of three-years (1996 for time 1; 1999 for time 2) in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Participation was voluntary at both points in time. The initial sample (T1) was drawn from 32 public and private schools in the ACT through the Life at School Survey<sup>1</sup> (for the representativeness of the sample and other details, see Ahmed, 2001). All these schools were coeducational.

Of the original 978 families, 581 families (59 per cent) agreed to participate in a follow-up survey. Of the families who agreed to par-

<sup>1</sup> <http://crj.anu.edu.au/school.html>

ticipate in the follow-up survey, 365 families (63 per cent) returned their questionnaires, with 47 per cent boys and 53 per cent girls participating, drawn from grades 7 to 10 (mean age = 13.50, SD = .87) in 1996. Selective attrition rate was not evident in that participants who continued to participate at T2 did not significantly differ from those who did not continue to participate in terms of their demographic characteristics (child's sex, age, grade, language spoken at home, parents' employment status and education level) and bullying/victimisation experiences. However, they did differ in term of child's ethnicity: Australian parents were more likely to take part than non-Australian parents. Reasons for agreeing to take part in the follow-up but failing to do so were as follows: 19 per cent could not be contacted at follow-up; 7 per cent did not return the questionnaires as promised; 7 per cent wanted to quit from the follow-up; and 4 per cent for other unavoidable reasons.

In total, 365 students (girls = 180, boys = 163; missing data on gender = 22) were available for this study of stability in bullying roles. In 1999, 17 per cent were seventh graders ( $N = 59$ ), 41 per cent were eighth graders ( $N = 141$ ), 38 per cent were ninth graders ( $N = 129$ ) and 4 per cent were tenth graders ( $N = 14$ ). The number of students varied across analyses, due to missing values.

#### *Procedure*

At T1 students who had been given written permission to participate by a parent or guardian completed their questionnaires during school hours. Students were provided with a widely recognised definition of the term 'bullying' (Olweus, 1992; Rigby, 1996):

*We call it bullying when someone repeatedly hurts or frightens someone weaker than themselves on purpose. Remember it is not bullying when two of you about the same strength have the odd fight or quarrel. Bullying can be done*

*in different ways: by hurtful teasing, threatening actions, name calling or hitting or kicking.*

It was also explained to the students that for an act to be considered bullying, it had to be unprovoked, that is, the act of bullying was not someone settling a score or getting even.

At T2 questionnaires were sent out to those families who expressed their willingness at T1 to participate in a follow-up Life at School survey. The student who completed the questionnaire at T1 completed the follow-up Life at School questionnaire at T2.

#### **Measures**

##### *Shame management variables*

Shame management variables were measured with the Management of Shame State: Shame Acknowledgement and Shame Displacement (MOSS-SASD; for details about its psychometric properties see Ahmed, 2001). Since its initial use, the dimensions of MOSS-SASD have been extended by empirical research from 10 to 16. Of the additional five dimensions, one represents internalising shame and four represent shame avoidance.

Briefly, the MOSS-SASD was designed to capture the responses that individuals make when they encounter a situation where they are caught performing an act of social and/or moral wrongdoing. It comprises bullying scenarios each describing a bullying incident at school.<sup>2</sup> In this study, four scenarios (see the appendix) were used that were common to the questionnaires in both waves. Following each bullying scenario the students were asked to indicate how they would feel if they were the one doing the bullying, using a 'yes' (1)/'no' (2) scoring format. For analytic purposes, all items in the MOSS-SASD were recoded so that higher scores reflected affirmation of shame responses.

A factor analytical procedure was used to reduce the 15 dimensions to 4. The 4 shame management dimensions (shame acknowl-

<sup>2</sup> In addition to these hypothetical incidents of school bullying, children were asked how they actually managed shame if they had bullied peers in reality. The MOSS-SASD items for an imagined scenario and a real-life experience were significantly and positively correlated ranging from .25 to .44. This provides support for the use of hypothetical situations with young children. Further support comes from a more recent study (Ferguson *et al.*, 2000) in which a self-report questionnaire with hypothetical situations was successfully used with children aged from 6 to 13 years.

edgement, shame displacement, internalising shame and shame avoidance)<sup>3</sup> are now described below.

### Shame acknowledgement

For the shame acknowledgement scale, there were five components: (1) feeling shame, (2) hiding self, (3) taking responsibility, (4) making amends and (5) anger at self.

The 'feeling shame' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .38 to .61;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel ashamed of yourself?' across the four scenarios. The 'hiding self' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .59 to .72;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like hiding from others?' across the scenarios. The 'taking responsibility' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .51 to .62;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like blaming yourself for what happened?' across the scenarios. The 'making amends' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .26 to .53;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like making the situation better?' across the scenarios. Finally, the 'anger at self' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .46 to .65;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel angry at yourself in this situation?' across the scenarios.

Because these five components were positively and significantly correlated (ranging from .38 to .64;  $p < .001$ ), they were averaged to construct the shame acknowledgement scale ( $M = 1.76$ ;  $SD = .27$ ;  $\alpha = .84$ ), a higher score indicating greater shame acknowledgement.

### Shame displacement

For the shame displacement scale, there

were again five components: (1) externalising blame, (2) unresolved feelings, (3) anger at others, (4) retaliatory anger and (5) displaced anger.

The 'externalising blame' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .22 to .42;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like blaming others for what happened?' across the four scenarios. The 'unresolved feelings' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .33 to .63;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like unable to decide who is to blame?' across the four scenarios. The 'anger at others' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .44 to .62;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel angry at the student in this situation?' across the four scenarios. The 'retaliatory anger' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .21 to .46;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like getting back at the student?' across the four scenarios. The 'displaced anger' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .51 to .69;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like throwing/kicking something?' across the scenarios.

Because these components were positively and significantly correlated (ranging from .16 to .52;  $p < .001$ ), they were averaged to make the shame displacement scale ( $M = 1.10$ ,  $SD = .15$ ;  $\alpha = .68$ ), with a higher score indicating greater shame displacement.

### Internalising shame

For the internalising shame scale, there were two components: (1) viewing others' rejection and (2) self-abusive feelings.

The 'viewing others' rejection' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .42 to

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<sup>3</sup> As posited in the shame management theory, shame acknowledgement was positively correlated with internalising shame ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and negatively with shame displacement ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and shame avoidance ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also as expected, shame displacement and shame avoidance were positively correlated ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, internalising shame showed negative correlation with shame avoidance ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ); no significant relation was found between internalising shame and shame displacement.

.58;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you think others would reject you?' across the four scenarios. The 'self-abusive feelings' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .53 to .73;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you hate yourself in this situation?' across the four scenarios.

Both these components were positively and significantly correlated ( $r = .49$ ;  $p < .001$ ); they were averaged to make the internalising shame scale ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = .31$ ;  $\alpha = .65$ ), with a higher score indicating that one is feeling devalued in others' eyes.

### Shame avoidance

For the shame avoidance scale, there were four components: (1) laughing it off, (2) denial of event, (3) feeling nothing happened and (4) making a joke of the event.

The 'laughing it off' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .43 to .56;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you laugh it off?' across the four scenarios. The 'denial' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .47 to .61;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you pretend it didn't happen?' across the four scenarios. The 'feeling nothing happened' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .46 to .65;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you feel like nothing really happened?' across the four scenarios. The 'make a joke of the event' component was computed by averaging the responses (correlation ranged from .40 to .52;  $p < .001$ ) to the question 'Would you make a joke of it?' across the four scenarios.

Because these components were positively and significantly correlated (ranging from .31 to .73;  $p < .001$ ), they were averaged to make the shame avoidance scale ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = .25$ ;  $\alpha = .77$ ), with a higher score indicating greater shame avoidance.

### Bullying/victimisation

To classify children into their bullying status, five questions were used (some were new and some were taken from the Peer Relations Questionnaire; Rigby & Slee, 1993).

1. Children's group bullying behaviour was assessed through asking students: 'How often have you been a part of a group that bullied someone during the last year?' Response options ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (several times a week), with high scores indicating high frequency of group bullying incidents ( $M = 1.59$ ;  $SD = .69$ ).
2. Children's self-initiated bullying behaviour was measured in the same way, but with a change in the wording of the question: 'How often have you, on your own, bullied someone during the last year?' ( $M = 1.43$ ;  $SD = .72$ ).
3. Children were asked about the reason for bullying: 'Why do you think you bullied that child?' Only those children were categorised as bullies who answered 'no' to the option 'to get even' provided in the questionnaire. Other options were: 'I think it's fun to bully, so he/she knows who is powerful, he/she looks or acts different, and it's okay to hurt someone who bothers me.'
4. Victimization was measured by asking students to indicate how often they had been the victim of bullying during the last year. Responses were made on a six-point scale ranging from one (most days) to six (never). This index was reverse scored so that a high score indicated high frequency of experienced victimisation ( $M = 2.37$ ;  $SD = 1.46$ ).
5. As with bullying, the reason for being bullied had to be unprovoked. Children were asked about the reason for being a victim: 'Why do think you were bullied?' Only those children were categorised as victims who answered 'no' to the given option 'I did something hurtful to someone'. Other options were: 'I am smaller, weaker or younger, I guess I just deserved it, I look or act different and I always do well in class.'

### Grouping children by their bullying status

For the purpose of grouping children by their bullying status, the classification procedure<sup>4</sup> adopted was identical to that used in

the initial study (Ahmed, 2001). Briefly, the act of bullying/victimisation had to be unprovoked. In other words, if the intention of the act was not 'tit for tat', it was considered bullying. Similarly, the victimisation classification was applicable only to those incidents in which the victim had not done something hurtful to someone.

Under this strategy, provoked bullies, provoked victims and provoked bullies/victims were excluded from both waves so the classification criterion fitted the definition used in this study. Specifically, the intention was to include those acts which were not defensive responses to provocation. In other words, they could take on a bully role like other bullies and a victim role like other victims.

The four categories of bullying status discussed in this paper were as follows:

1. Members of the 'non-bully/non-victim' group: they had neither bullied others nor were victims of bullying.
2. Members of the 'victim' group: they had been victimised without provocation and had never bullied anyone.
3. Members of the 'bully' group: they had never been victimised but had bullied others, alone or in a group, without provocation.
4. Members of the 'bully/victim' group: they both bullied others and were bullied by others without provocation.

## Results

### *How stable is a child's bullying status across time?*

To address the question of the stability of a child's bullying status, comparisons were performed for each of the four bullying groups for 1996 and 1999. Because of the nominal nature of the variables, Cramer's ( $r$

= .26,  $p < .001$ ) coefficients were calculated. To check whether stability within the groups was significant across years, the standardised residual<sup>5</sup> was used and compared with a critical value to establish the level of significance.

*Non-bullies/non-victims.* Table 1 shows that 46 per cent ( $N = 23$ ) of the non-bullies/non-victims remained in the same category. The standardised residual (Std. Res. = 3.2) is suggested for a significant stability for non-bullies/non-victims from 1996 to 1999. This is especially true for girls. Further cross-tabulations by gender revealed that of 52 per cent girls remained stable in their non-bully/non-victim role, compared with 38 per cent of boys. From the perspective of those interested in building resiliency in children, it is intriguing that of the 1996 non-bullies/non-victims, almost as many became bullies ( $N = 20$ ) in 1999 as remained non-bullies/non-victims. The breakdown by gender also reveals that boys outnumbered girls (57 per cent to 28 per cent) in shifting to the bullying group three years later. Interestingly, none of the boys became victims.

*Victims.* Of the 1996 victims, 31 per cent ( $N = 21$ ) remained in that status in 1999, whereas 23 per cent ( $N = 16$ ) moved to the non-bully/ non-victim group. The stability findings (Std. Res. = 3.4,  $p < .01$ ) suggest that being a victim in 1996 appeared to be a significant risk factor for being a victim again in 1999. A moderately significant positive correlation between 1996 and 1999 data on a six-point continuous scale 'victimisation' ( $r = .28$ ;  $p < .001$ ) provides further support for this stability result in victimisation. Girls again show more stability in their bullying roles (34 per cent) than boys (26

<sup>4</sup>Despite the clarification of the term 'bullying' during data collection, it was thought that some students might forget the definition while answering the survey or might be inclined to answer in a socially desirable way. Therefore, a conservative classification criterion (to exclude provoked acts of bullying) was adopted to ensure that no erroneous identifications could be made between bullying roles.

<sup>5</sup>The residual statistic reflects the cells that contribute most toward the effect, regardless of whether the overall test is statistically significant. The residual, or the difference, between the observed frequency and the expected frequency is a more reliable indicator of a cell's contribution than either Chi-square or Cramer's coefficients.

Bullying status in 1999				
Bullying status in 1996	Non-bully/ non-victim	Victim	Bully	Bully/victim
Non-bully/non-victim	<b>46%</b> ( <i>N</i> = 23)	6% ( <i>N</i> = 3)	40% ( <i>N</i> = 20)	8% ( <i>N</i> = 4)
Boy	<b>38%</b>	0%	57%	5%
Girl	<b>52%</b>	10%	28%	10%
	<b>SR# = 3.2</b>			
Victims	23% ( <i>N</i> = 16)	<b>31%</b> ( <i>N</i> = 21)	25% ( <i>N</i> = 14)	21% ( <i>N</i> = 17)
Boy	26%	<b>26%</b>	15%	33%
Girl	22%	<b>34%</b>	24%	20%
		<b>SR# = 3.4</b>		
Bullies	23% ( <i>N</i> = 8)	9% ( <i>N</i> = 3)	<b>51%</b> ( <i>N</i> = 18)	17% ( <i>N</i> = 6)
Boy	26%	0%	<b>52%</b>	22%
Girl	17%	25%	<b>50%</b>	8%
			<b>SR# = 2.1</b>	
Bullies/victims	15% ( <i>N</i> = 16)	11% ( <i>N</i> = 12)	34% ( <i>N</i> = 37)	<b>40%</b> ( <i>N</i> = 44)
Boy	12%	10%	41%	<b>37%</b>
Girl	18%	12%	26%	<b>44%</b>
				<b>SR# = 2.7</b>

**Table 1:** A comparison of children's (boys and girls) bullying status (non-bully/non-victim, victim, bully, bully/victim) between 1996 and 1999

Notes: Cramer's *V* coefficient = .26,  $p < .001$  (the coefficient was .27 ( $p < .001$ ) for both boys and girls).

# Standardized residual; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ . Theoretically important predictions are in bold typeface.

per cent).

*Bullies.* Of those in the bully status group, 51 per cent ( $N = 18$ ) who reported being bullies in 1996 were still bullies in 1999. These numbers represent a sizeable proportion and suggest that being a bully in 1996 was a significant risk factor for being a bully in 1999 (Std. Res. = 2.1). The finding of a moderate positive correlation between 1996 and 1999 data on a five-point continuous scale 'bullying' ( $r = .32$ ;  $p < .001$  for group bullying;  $r = .17$ ;  $p < .01$  for self-initiated bullying) provides support for moderate stability in bullying across years. Of those who remained stable, boys (52 per cent) were slightly more likely than girls (50 per cent) to remain stable in the bullying group.

*Bullies/victims.* Finally, 40 per cent ( $N = 44$ ) of bullies/victims remained stable in 1999, suggesting a significant stability of these children over a period of three years (Std. Res. = 2.7). Findings in relation to gender

and bullying status showed a reverse pattern. This time, girls (44 per cent) were more stable than boys (37 per cent) in remaining in the bully/victim group. Interestingly, more boys (41 per cent compared to 26 per cent girls) moved to the bullying group, whereas more girls (12 per cent compared to 10 per cent boys) moved to the victim group. Only 15 per cent of children in this group ( $N = 16$ ) were able to assume the role of non-bully/non-victim in 1999.

*To what extent do children's shame management skills relate to their bullying status over time?*

To respond to this query, a series of independent sample *t* tests were conducted to assess the relations between group stability and shame management skills (shame acknowledgement, shame displacement, internalising shame and shame avoidance) measured in 1999. The purpose was to compare children who exhibited the same pattern at T1 and T2 (e.g. stable bullies, stable victims and stable bullies/victims) with those

who exhibited a desisting pattern and moved to the non-bully/non-victim group.

*Stable bullies versus desisted bullies.* Shame management scores were compared between stable bullies ( $N = 18$ ) and desisted bullies who became non-bullies/non-victims ( $N = 8$ ). As Table 2 presents, desisted bullies ( $M = 1.85$ ) had significantly higher scores on shame acknowledgement than stable bullies ( $M = 1.52$ ). In accordance with hypothesis 1, the 1996 bullies who later became non-bullies/non-victims were significantly more likely to feel shame, take responsibility and make amends for the harm done ( $t = -3.46, p < .01$ ). No significant group difference on shame displacement was found, however.

*Stable victims versus desisted victims.* T test comparisons of shame management scores were made between stable victims ( $N = 21$ ) and desisted victims who became non-bully/non-victims ( $N = 16$ ). From Table 2, desisted victims ( $M = 1.42$ ) had higher scores on internalising shame than the stable victims ( $M = 1.25$ ). Initially, this result comes as a shock as it goes against the expectation (hypothesis 2), although the t value did not reach the level of

significance ( $t = -1.71, p < .10$ ). In retrospect, however, this finding may provide an interesting insight into the cycle of shame and rejection among victims. It is quite possible that stable victims are now in an entrenched pattern of shame → rejection → shame which no longer appears inappropriate and uncomfortable to them. In contrast, desisted victims may have started to regret allowing themselves to become victims in the past, and are now responding by saying that if ever they were involved in bullying someone, they would hate themselves. They like their new status and are more critical of the bullying culture that they accepted as normal in the past.

*Stable bullies/victims versus desisted bullies/victims.* Scores on shame management were compared between stable bullies/victims ( $N = 44$ ) and desisted bullies/victims who became non-bullies/non-victims ( $N = 16$ ). In accordance with hypothesis 3, desisted bullies/victims ( $M = 1.16$ ) had lower scores on shame avoidance than stable bullies/victims ( $M = 1.29$ ). This suggests that the 1996 bullies/victims who shifted to the non-bully/non-victim group were less likely to avoid shame feelings by laughing it

Group membership		Shame management dimensions (1999)			
1996	1999	Shame acknowledgement	Shame displacement	Internalising shame	Shame avoidance
Bullies	Stable bullies	1.52 (.35)	1.11 (.11)	1.18 (.28)	1.26 (.25)
	Desisted bullies (NBNV)	1.85 (.14)	1.09 (.12)	1.47 (.38)	1.23 (.22)
Victims	Stable victims	1.89 (.15)	1.06 (.09)	<b>1.25 (.22)</b>	1.14 (.21)
	Desisted victims (NBNV)	1.91 (.14)	1.12 (.16)	<b>1.42 (.35)</b>	1.19 (.30)
B/V~	Stable B/V	1.69 (.32)	1.11 (.14)	1.27 (.29)	<b>1.29 (.29)</b>
	Desisted B/V (NBNV)	1.81 (.22)	1.09 (.16)	1.31 (.39)	1.16 (.20)
NBNV#	Stable NBNV	1.80 (.28)	1.01 (.03)	1.28 (.33)	1.09 (.11)
	Shifted to bullies	1.61 (.26)	1.12 (.20)	1.14 (.14)	1.18 (.25)

Table 2: Means comparisons of shame management dimensions in 1999 between stable and desisted groups (SD in parenthesis)

Note: Theoretically important predictions are in bold typeface. NBNV# denotes non-bully/non-victim. B/V~ denotes bully/victim.

off and making a joke of any mishap that took place with peers ( $t = 1.86, p < .07$ ). But no significant group differences were found on shame acknowledgement and shame displacement as hypothesised.

### **Stable non-bullies/non-victims as a standard for others**

The final stage of the analysis aims to examine the shame management skill differences between stable non-bullies/non-victims ( $N = 23$ ) and those who moved to the bullying group in 1999 ( $N = 20$ ). In support of hypothesis 4, stable non-bully/non-victims continued to maintain socially adaptive shame management skills in terms of high shame acknowledgement and low shame displacement, although no significant difference was observed on shame avoidance. As Table 2 shows, the stable non-bullies/non-victims ( $M = 1.80$ ) are more inclined to acknowledge shame than those who moved to the bullying group in 1999 ( $M = 1.61$ ); that is, they are now more likely to feel shame, take responsibility and make amends for wrongdoing ( $t = 2.37, p < .05$ ). Moreover, they are less inclined to displace shame ( $M = 1.01$ ) than the other group ( $M = 1.12$ ); that is, they are less likely to blame others and feel angry at others for what went wrong ( $t = -2.70, p < .01$ ). Overall, these findings suggest that non-bully/non-victims who continued to maintain the same status in 1999 as in 1996 continued to manage shame in a socially adaptive way.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The results of this study have significant implications for early preventive bullying interventions. Findings support efforts at early intervention for children at risk through demonstrating how shame management skills fluctuated with maturation and how fluctuations were related to their bullying status over a period of three years. The study also supports earlier work showing that a child's bullying status is moderately stable over time. It was found that being a bully in earlier years is the most significant risk factor for being a bully in later years. Results in relation to the stability of the non-

bully/non-victim role give hope for building resilience among children in relation to a bullying culture, and point to the importance of facilitating and maintaining the role in early years. Once a set of protective factors is identified, interventions can be geared to strengthening these qualities in a child's life space. The group that showed least likelihood of moving to the non-bully/non-victim group was bullies/victims. It is important to note that the design of bullies/victims in this study was not a catch-all category. They were children who behaved like bullies at one time, and like victims at another time. It is, therefore, not surprising that they were least likely to move to the non-bully/non-victim category. Special interventions may be required to meet these volatile children's complex needs.

The stability issue aside, the more important findings to emerge from this study are the long-term significance of shame management skills. The change in bullying roles that exists in the findings lends support to the restorative justice argument that shame when managed adaptively deters wrongdoing (for details, see Braithwaite, 1989, 2001). The results of the present study reveal that shame acknowledgement is associated with desisting from bullying, whereas shame displacement is associated with a rise in bullying. This pattern of findings in relation to shame management and bullying status strengthens the argument for the importance of socially adaptive shame management skills through testing the hypotheses with a longitudinal design. The aspects of the hypotheses that were not confirmed involved: (a) lower displacement among bullies who became non-bullies/non-victims; (b) higher acknowledgement and lower displacement among bullies/victims who became non-bullies/non-victims; and (c) higher avoidance among non-bullies/non-victims who became bullies. These results await further exploration.

The findings also extend earlier studies of shame management by incorporating two additional non-adaptive shame dimensions: internalising shame and shame avoidance. Because these are newly developed dimen-

sions, the hypotheses offered were somewhat exploratory and provided some interesting and challenging results for future work. The finding that desisted victims showed higher levels of internalising shame only when they imagined themselves as bullies, including self-abusive feelings and others' rejection, than stable victims goes against expectations, and opens up avenues of further research for understanding children's shame development trajectories. It appears likely that, despite these victims' shifting into the non-bully/non-victim group, they had not yet overcome their feelings of rejection and self-pity for being a victim in the past. They were left with a sense of past shame and rejection which was very much related to perceived social stigma for not being able to manage themselves in a bullying situation. Stepping outside the victim territory, they now have a clear and compelling vision of their past which they see more clearly than those who have stayed in the same group. These desisted victims may need assistance in disengaging from those bitter feelings so that they can view their lives from a wholly fresh perspective.

As with hypothesis 3 in relation to shame avoidance, an interesting pattern was found between desisted bullies/victims and those who remained stable bullies/victims. Previous work has shown that children in the bully/victim group assume the shame management pattern that fits both the stable bully (less shame acknowledgement) and the stable victim (less shame displacement). It seems that the concurrence of two different styles of shame management may have escalated over time into an avoidance style of shame management to escape unpleasant feelings of confusion and conflict that cannot be resolved. Alternatively, the avoidance style may have to protect bullies/victims from an environment that is inconsistently hostile to them. Bullies/victims are likely to experience mixed messages at school. One moment they are causing harm to others and have power over them, and are punished or reprimanded for their action. The next minute, they are the ones being hurt, looking for protection and earning the sympathy of others. And if schools are weary of

encountering the flipping roles, the simple and easy response may be to ignore these children altogether. The current result for bullies/victims reveals a worrying pattern for this significant population of dual-status students, and is likely to present a more difficult treatment challenge. Therefore, further longitudinal work is vital to exploring patterns of comorbidity in shame reactions, and implementing and evaluating appropriate treatment interventions.

To sum up, while there is a story of stability in children's bullying status, there is also a story of change over time: a child's particular bullying status can change and this change is associated with his or her shame management skills. Children who had moved out of the bullying category by 1999 and had taken up the role of non-bully/non-victim were distinctive in having shame acknowledgement capacities. Desisted victims, those who had moved out of the victim category by 1999 and had taken up the role of non-bully/non-victim, were distinctive in their tendencies to internalise shame. For desisted bullies/victims, the distinctive feature was a low level of shame avoidance.

In this study, it was possible to select groups of children who, through self-reports, met the requirements for being a bully, a victim, a bully/victim and a non-bully/non-victim from a sample of 978 children who were randomly selected from ACT schools. The requirements for assigning unprovoked bullying status were applied not once but on two separate occasions, three years apart. Many of the children made a major transition during this period from primary schools (grades 1–6) to high schools (grades 7–10). This meant a new school and new peers (high schools serve a large geographical area and have more students and less supervision than the smaller primary schools). In both the primary and high school situations, the classification criteria worked well, producing comparable depictions of the pattern of bullying/victimisation at school.

While the scope of the recruitment strategy and the longitudinal aspect of the design were the strengths of the study, the

design is not without its drawbacks. First, although the sample size of the current study compares favourably with other longitudinal studies of bullying, a larger sample size would have provided greater power to detect possible causal associations. This is particularly pertinent to the present study where interests narrow down to why, for example, bullies/ victims changed to become bullies or victims or non-bullies/non-victims. The second limitation is related to the data collection procedure. Best practice in identifying bullying roles is the now widely accepted multi-method approach. This means that bullying status would be ascribed on the basis of a number of the following: self-report survey, teacher nomination, peer nomination and interviews with students. The study is deficient in relying solely on the self-report survey method. Finally, collecting data at more regular time-points would have given a more complete account of stability and change, and provided improved opportunity for keeping track of families participating in the study. An improved response rate at follow-up would have improved the prospects of using causal modelling to link shame management and bullying status over time.

A question that is raised by the current data set, collected at two time points and capturing the transition from primary school to high school, is that any one of a number of changes in these children's daily lives might be responsible for changes in shame management and group membership. We need to understand the peer dynamics associated with bullying during this critical period of adolescence, when new power relations may have been established and new barriers to self-affirmation may have appeared. Developmental researchers (Erikson, 1982; Seifert & Hoffnung, 1987) emphasise the importance of developmental changes during adolescence that make these years complicated and stressful for most. Relationships with peers take on increasing importance and adolescents experience growing concern about making friends and adapting to the new power relations and the new school commu-

nity. All these factors can cause stress that may trigger poor shame management skills and bullying. Bullying has recently been considered as a way of coping with a new social group (see Pelligrini & Bartini, 2000) to ensure adaptation, and this may in part explain why a great proportion (40 per cent) of the non-bullies/non-victims (1996) moved into the bullying group in 1999.

Along with the social forces at school, any life event (whether negative or positive) in adolescents could also be an important factor in explaining the relationships between shame management and bullying along this developmental pathway. With many factors operating simultaneously, one method of study might be to use an idiographic approach whereby the shame management patterns of each adolescent are examined and each pattern is considered as a configuration characterising that particular adolescent. Through this in-depth and detailed approach, we could gain a thorough understanding of what makes an adolescent distinctively individual so that a need-specific intervention plan within a 'whole-of-school' approach can be designed. This approach may be particularly suited to those children with the complicated profile of bully/victim. It may be that for children plagued by bullying encounters, as bullies or victims, over a number of years, one size does not fit all – interventions need to be tailor-made.

### **Acknowledgement**

At the time of writing this article, I was Research Fellow, Regulatory Institutions Network, Research School of Social Sciences, at the Australian National University. I am indebted to Dr Valerie Braithwaite, Director of the Centre for Tax System Integrity, ANU, for her valuable contributions to this paper.

### **Address for correspondence**

Dr Eliza Ahmed, Assistant Director, Research, Evaluation and Legislation Group, DEWR, ACT-2601, Australia.  
E-mail: Eliza.Ahmed@dewr.gov.au

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## Appendix: The MOSS-SASD bullying scenarios

1. Imagine that you are walking along the corridor at school and you see another student. You put your foot out and trip the student. Then you realise that the class teacher has just come into the corridor and saw what you did.
2. Imagine that you have been making rude comments about a student's family. You find out that your class teacher heard what you said.
3. Imagine that a younger student is going to the canteen to buy something. You grab his/her money. You warn the student not to tell or else. Then you realise that your class teacher saw you and heard what you said.
4. Imagine that you are left in the classroom alone with a student. You think that the teacher has gone and so you start teasing the student. Then you realise that the teacher is still in the classroom.