The social ecology of girls' bullying practices: exploratory research in two London schools

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Abstract This exploratory study adopts a socio-ecological approach to examine the context of school bullying. It asks: (1) what are students' accounts of bullying practices?; (2) how are these enabled and constrained by the school-environment?; (3) how is gender implicated? Qualitative data were collected from girls in two schools in London via focus groups (one in each school; students aged 12-15) and seven semi-structured interviews (in one school; students aged 16-18); and from school policy documents. Our interpretation of girls' accounts, informed by Giddens' structuration theory, suggests that bullying practices were spatially patterned in the schools and often characterised by the regulation of girls' sexuality and sexual-harassment. Repeated acts of aggression were fluid with regard to the bully and victim role, challenging the dominant view of bullying as characterised by consistent disparities in power between individuals. Schools structured bullying behaviour via policies and practices that ignored these forms of abuse and which focused on and may have been complicit in the making of stable 'bully' and 'victim' roles, thus indirectly contributing to the reproduction of unhealthy relationships between students. In terms of gender, traditional gendered and sexual discourses appear to structure the identities of the schools and girls in our study.

Keywords: bullying, peer abuse, girls, qualitative, social ecology

Introduction

The World Health Organization considers bullying to be a major adolescent health problem and the prevalence, harms and costs of bullying make addressing it a public health priority (Krug *et al*. 2002; Scott *et al*. 2001). Definitions of bullying in the literature vary. However, the commonly held view is that bullying is long standing or repeated negative behaviour that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power (Olweus 1993; Roland 1989). Bullying among young people may take physical, verbal, relational or social forms. Physical bullying (e.g. hitting, pushing) and verbal bullying (e.g. name-calling and teasing) are typically considered to be a direct form, while relational or social bullying (e.g. social exclusion and spreading

rumours) refers to an indirect form. There is evidence that direct and indirect bullying and victimisation are associated with health risk behaviours such as substance use (Forero *et al.* 1999; Juvonen *et al.* 2003) as well as poorer psychological health status, school avoidance and poor academic performance (Rigby 2003; Kaltiala-Heino *et al.* 2000; Swearer *et al.* 2010) although causality in either direction is possible. Youth bullying may also reinforce existing socioeconomic inequalities, as low socioeconomic status at family and school levels is associated with increased risk of experiencing bullying (Jansen *et al.* 2011). Schools are the most important site of bullying, as this is where it most often begins, and where young people are most concerned about bullying and victimisation (Chamberlain and Britain 2010).

Research on school bullying, beginning with the seminal work of Olweus in the 1970s, has historically been dominated by psychologists examining characteristics of the individuals involved as bullies, victims, or bully-victims, in terms of personality traits and emotional and social cognitive abilities (Smith and Brain 2000; Ma *et al.* 2001; Swearer *et al.* 2010). More recent sociological research has critiqued this approach and adopted a socio-ecological perspective to school bullying, focusing on the roles of peer group dynamics and social positioning (Eslea *et al.* 2003, Besag 2006, Duncan 1999, Macdonald and Swart 2004; Dance 2002, Pauelle 2013); and school ethos and discipline (Espelage and Swearer 2003, Jamal *et al.* 2013, Rigby 2003, Bibou-Nakou *et al.* 2012).

While this socio-ecological approach has led to a more complete picture of school bullying, there are some gaps in the literature. In particular, the interplay between student agency and institutional factors at the school level, and the peer social system promoted by students, has been under-examined. Empirical studies of bullying have also neglected the importance of wider structural factors such as gender and ethnicity.

Integrated whole-school approaches have been recommended as responses to bullying (Eslea and Smith 1998; Olweus and Limper 2010), but evaluations of interventions based on these approaches have yielded mixed results (Rigby and Bagshaw 2003; Smith *et al.* 2004; Bauer *et al.* 2007; Merrell *et al.* 2008). Further research is needed to explore how students' lived experiences of bullying relate both to the school environment and to norms and processes in the wider society. This understanding could help in enabling whole-school interventions to better address bullying by changing the context in which students live, interact and learn to create conditions more supportive of good relationships.

While gender has been examined, this has mostly focused on gender differences in bullying (Vaillancourt *et al.* 2003; Giles and Heyman 2005), as well as how gender is socially constructed within schools and the processes involved in 'doing gender' in the context of bullying (Lahelma 2002; Renold 2005; Duncan 2004; Youdell 2006; Ringrose 2008; Ringrose and Renold 2009). However, these studies have generally not investigated how gender might be implicated in processes by which the school environment acts as an ecological determinant of bullying behaviours.

This study aims to address these gaps in the literature by focusing on the views of girls, as their voices have been marginalised in discourses of 'risky behaviour' and school achievement that overwhelmingly focus on boys, reinforcing some fallacious assumptions in research and policy that girls no longer face problems in school (McRobbie 2008; Keddie 2009). The study investigates the processes via which the school physical and social environment influences bullying practices, and considers how gender is implicated. In order to theorise these processes, we draw on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. Giddens argues that social structures are constructed via agency and agency is both enabled and constrained by these structures. In this context structures would include both school environments and the wider social organisation they reflect. With respect to gender, structuration theory suggests that while gender roles constrain everyday practices, they are also shaped by those practices, in processes of 'identity

work' which reconstruct roles in the process of their performance. The theory also indicates that this recursive relationship between agency and structure is mediated by institutional settings. This study considers whether bullying practices can be seen as 'identity work' in action, particularly with respect to gender, and how this understanding might shape our view of their relationship to the school setting. While this is a small-scale qualitative study, research of this kind allows us to capture students' lived experiences of schooling and adds deeper understanding of unfamiliar phenomena without making an exaggerated claim for generalisability. This article provides original insight into bullying as experienced by girls focusing on the following questions: (1) what are students' accounts of bullying practices; (2) how are these enabled and constrained by the school environment; and (3) how is gender implicated in this?

Methods

This article arises from a larger exploratory project, which involved two focus groups, seven interviews and an analysis of school policy documents related to bullying in two schools in London, and aimed to look at the ways in which schools' social and physical environments shape health behaviours (e.g. eating, drug and alcohol use, bullying and aggressive behaviour) from the perspective of girls. Most girls participating in the project identified bullying as an important issue in their school and the majority of the discussion time was spent on the topic; it is thus the focus of this article.

The CASS School of Education and Communities at the University of East London provided a list of secondary schools with which they had links. A list of 13 schools was obtained, and we contacted 12 of them (one was an all-boys school) to participate in the study. Two schools, Eastgrove and Crescent (pseudonyms), volunteered to participate. Other schools did not respond or reported having no time to participate.

Eastgrove is a voluntary aided school. It has an all-girls main campus for students aged 11–15 years and a separate mixed sex centre for girls and boys aged 16–18 years. Ninety per cent of the school population are minorities (the largest groups being African or Caribbean), 36.3 per cent do not speak English as a first language and 16 per cent of students are eligible for free school meals, closely matching the national average of 15.9 per cent (DfE 2011). Crescent is a community school for girls 11–16 years with 92.5 per cent of students not speaking English as a first language (the composition of minority students was not available, though the school sits within a predominately South Asian neighbourhood) and 30 per cent of students are eligible for free school meals, well above the national average. Both schools are located in one of the most deprived boroughs in the UK, characterised by low incomes, low levels of qualifications and skills, poor housing and poor health. Both schools are rated 'outstanding' according to Ofsted.

Qualitative data were collected at Eastgrove and Crescent between July and October 2012 via two focus group discussions (one in each school) with girls 12–15 years and seven semi-structured interviews with girls 16–18 years from the mixed sex centre at Eastgrove (we included the views of these older students in our study as this age group has traditionally been less researched). The use of focus groups is common for exploratory research (Hughes and DuMont 1993). Focus groups are useful for understanding mutual experiences and identities, identifying cultural knowledge shared among participants and providing access to the language participants use to explain their experiences. They are also useful for enabling girls to discuss how the school environment shapes their experiences. The limitation however is that they may insufficiently capture the range of individual experiences.

Interviews, rather than focus groups, were conducted with the 16–18 year olds from Eastgrove for pragmatic reasons: the research at Eastgrove was undertaken at the end of the school term making it difficult to coordinate a focus group as older students had different schedules and were busy preparing for exams. Interviews allowed greater flexibility as individual students could choose a time that was most convenient to them.

For the focus group discussions at both schools, a teacher was informed about the aims of the study by telephone and sent a leaflet describing the project. The teacher was asked to recruit a group of students that broadly reflected the student community (including both pro-school and disengaged). Teachers provided these students with a leaflet written for an adolescent audience describing the project. It appeared that girls recruited for the focus group at Crescent were all 'pro-school' students and girls recruited for the focus group at Eastgrove were varied in terms of their school engagement. In general, participants knew one another but were from different classes and year groups. For the interviews with Eastgrove students, a teacher forwarded an email and leaflet describing the project to students. Interested participants then contacted [FJ] via email to set up an interview date and time.

At Eastgrove, 11 students aged 12–15 participated in a focus group in the school courtyard, and seven students aged 16–17 participated in semi-structured interviews held in a private office at the University of East London. At Crescent, six students aged 12–15 participated in a focus group in the school library. Informed consent was sought from all students and for students less than 16 years, their parent or carer also gave informed consent. All participants received a £10 voucher. The study was approved by the University of East London ethics committee.

The focus group discussions and interviews began with a presentation of the aims of the larger research project: to understand how the school social and physical environment influences students' health behaviours. Young people were asked to identify what health topics they felt were most relevant to their school or important to them. A list of topics, including bullying, sexual harassment, eating and physical activity, mental well-being and tobacco and substance use was presented on large chart paper to guide the discussion. In both focus groups and interviews girls consistently directed the conversation to bullying as a key aspect of school life. Topic guides consisted of open-ended questions and prompts to collect information related to, for example: locations in the school important to health behaviours (e.g. what do you like or dislike about the canteen?); and the social dynamics of engaging in risk behaviours (e.g. how does a fight or argument unfold in the school?). However, the topic guide was covered in a flexible manner in order to allow conversations to progress in their own words. Focus group discussions and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Although the main source of data was accounts from girls themselves, this was supplemented with an analysis of publically available documents from the school websites. We searched the websites of Eastgrove and Crescent and read all documents with titles related to school rules, policies, conduct, principles, practices and/or standards. The documents pertinent to bullying were then included in the analysis. This included Eastgrove's anti-bullying policy (updated 2012) and Crescent's gender equality policy and exclusion policy (updated 2010). Crescent did not have a specific bullying policy on their website but a bullying policy was referenced in other policy documents.

Students' accounts of bullying and related behaviours and schools' policies related to bullying were selectively coded and extracted from the transcripts and documents, read and re-read in-depth and analysed thematically. For focus groups and interviews initial open coding was conducted which stuck closely to respondents' own words. Emerging themes were recorded and memos written. Subsequent stages involved axial coding to identify relationships between initial themes and patterns in the data, and interpreting the meaning of themes

and patterns. The analysis attempted to go beyond describing a set of observations by using interpretation to explain bullying processes grounded in the narratives of young people. As a further stage in the analysis, the content of school policies were compared and contrasted with thematically organised data from focus groups and interviews, to further develop the analysis.

Emerging themes

Sexual bullying practices in schools

Girls at Eastgrove and Crescent largely reported bullying practices such as spreading rumours, name-calling and teasing relating to girls' sexuality:

> They gossip, they spread rumours, they make fun of what music you listen to and seriously I was called a lesbian because I did not find One Direction [boy band] attractive (Focus group, Crescent).

Homophobic insults, for example being labelled a 'lesbian', were considered by all girls to be threatening and as one girl from Crescent said, could 'ruin your reputation'. Through such bullying tactics, girls appear to police one another's sexual identities in these schools, entrenching heterosexual norms as dominant and desirable:

> There was an incident once, I actually saw these two girls were [*makes a kiss face*], but they weren't actually [kissing], but they were really, really close to each other's face … They are lesbians [all girls make '*eww*' and '*hissing*' sounds in disapproval] (Focus group, Eastgrove).

> They call you a lesbian, even if you are not and if you are bisexual or something, they think you are disgusting and then they stay away from you (Focus group, Crescent).

Girls participating in focus groups at Crescent and Eastgrove also reported the aggressive ways in which their bodies were scrutinised by their peers. These were considered by girls as highly 'embarrassing' and included lifting skirts, pulling on bra straps and slapping bottoms. As one girl explained:

> These girls just run and slap you on the bum and they snap your bra strap, just to see if I was wearing a bra, it's disgusting (Focus group, Crescent).

While Crescent's gender equality policy states that the school will 'take appropriate action in cases of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination' it appeared that in practice, teachers and students at both Crescent and Eastgrove did not always recognise these behaviours as abusive because it occurred among girls, rather than between girls and boys:

> It should not be happening in the school and if you try to report a sexual harassment, the teachers do not take it serious, because it's not a boy doing it (Focus group, Crescent).
> To be honest if it was a boy pulling a girl's skirt it is a bit iffy, but girls pull each other's skirts up (Focus group, Eastgrove).

Sexual bullying was also commonly experienced by the older girls we interviewed from the mixed sex education setting at Eastgrove:

> At lunchtime we have to get ready for lessons switch over, there will be this group of boys where we walk [it] is where they hang out in the school ... But when they open the door, the way they look at you is like they are molesting you with their eyes if that's possible. They look at you and then they might go [*makes sniffing noise*] 'do you want to be in my league' or something. I think I heard one of the boys slapped a teacher's bum (Interview, Eastgrove).

> One time, I was even in my classroom and two lads came up to me and started like 'hey babe do you want to be my bitch' and things like that ... It can happen everywhere (Interview, Eastgrove).

> Even though it would be classed as like sexual harassment, nobody would say that so if someone came up and slapped your bum or whatever or would just be like 'oh your boobs look nice' or whatever, they [the school] would just say it is the norm, because that is what boys are like and stuff like that (Interview, Eastgrove).

Another girl explained in an interview that when she reported this type of abuse from male pupils to a trusted female teacher no action was taken to address the issue. The teacher recognised that this form of sexual abuse was common, but rather than challenging it, her advice was to 'get used to it':

> She [teacher] says that I will get used to it but she says it in a way that I have to watch [out for] myself. She has to watch herself and that is what she is saying. If she has to watch herself then I definitely have to watch myself (Interview, Eastgrove).

These examples highlight, as other research has previously done (e.g. Walkerdine 1990; Keddie 2009; Ringrose and Renold 2009), the ways that boys' sexual harassment towards girls is reinforced and normalised in these schools. In the context of girl-to-girl abuse, the findings suggest that similar to the ways in which some expressions of boys' aggressive behaviours are attributed to normal 'boy-like' behaviour, peer abuse based on sexuality and appearance among girls may also be attributed to normal 'girl-like' behaviour by teachers. Indeed, other research has suggested that some teachers consider these interactions as natural aspects of adolescent relationships and the hormonal 'explosion' of this developmental phase (Bansel *et al.* 2009).

These processes of gender regulation in schools has previously been described in studies exploring issues of masculinity, heterosexist and homophobic harassment, gender and sexual relations, and school based sex(uality) education (see for example, Mac an Ghaill 1994; Renold 2005; Pascoe 2011). While we recognise that there are differentiated patterns of identity construction, whereby individuals and peer groups draw on various resources to develop identities, it appears that among girls in this study, the norms of femininity still appeared to remain dominant. In the context of the mixed sex setting at Eastgrove, sexual harassment was common whereby boys directed verbal (name-calling) and physical (touching, slapping) abuse towards female students (and sometimes teachers), highlighting the pervasiveness of gender inequalities in the school environment. This suggests that Giddens' (1991) account of reflexivity in high modernity may have separated identity from tradition too sharply as hegemonic ideals of gender continue to structure and reproduce modern identities. Nonetheless, the data allow us to see how structure and action work together: sexual(ity) based bullying practices in these schools reproduced gender as a social category. In turn, the norms around these forms of gendered interaction were also reflected and reproduced by the way in which the schools in this study maintained dominant gendered conventions by sometimes ignoring that sexualised bullying practices were occurring.

Dynamic group process of peer abuse

Eastgrove's anti-bullying policy reports a school wide survey conducted by the school in 2012 which states that bullying at the school is most often characterised as verbal bullying (name calling, and threatening) and indirect bullying (social exclusion); and that most bullying was perceived by girls as: 'Carried out by groups rather than individuals' (Eastgrove anti-bullying policy document).

Indeed, one of the strategies recommended to students to avoid bullying is to 'make friends'. However, despite recognising the salience of peer groups in the school environment, the anti-bullying policy at Eastgrove had been set to identify individual bullies and victims whereby victims of bullying are told to be prepared to 'identify who is behaving like a bully'. This dyadic approach was challenged by girls in this study who stressed that there were 'stories' involved in their social interactions and that identifying individual bullies or victims was not always useful or possible:

> But I think the stereotype that there is a victim and there is a bully and then this bully is just doing it for no apparent reason, that is just really rare (Focus group, Crescent).

> It is so much different to what is going on in the school [how the school addresses bullying] and what the inside story is, I think the teachers most of the time think of it as the generic story of bullying, this girl did this and this girl did that, but there is so much more to explain in the story (Focus group, Crescent).

Ethnographic studies (Eder 1985; Adler and Adler 1995; Besag 2006) have previously revealed the 'clique' to be the central structure in the social organisation of young people, resulting in circles of power characterised by shifting cycles of inclusion and exclusion (Carrera *et al*. 2011). Girls in focus groups at Eastgrove and Crescent similarly stressed the importance of peer groups in their schools and explained that 'fitting in' and 'finding your group' were imperative to avoid being seen as vulnerable and that for some girls bullying others was a way in which to maintain your position in a peer group:

> Everyone needs to fit in. Hang out with the right kind of crew, have the right friends and just be a part of what everyone is, no matter what you do, you have to fit in (Focus group, Crescent).

> There was this one girl who went into a friendship just to get another girl jealous . . . she actually sparked a big fight (Focus group, Eastgrove).

> Some people want to even just show off to their friends, like 'yes I am going to fight this person, so I am going to bring them out here so everyone can see' (Focus group, Eastgrove).

Fletcher et al (2009a, 2009b, 2009c) in their studies of secondary schools in London as well as ethnographic studies from the US (Dance 2002; Paulle 2013) have suggested that the desperate need to fit in at school in order to avoid aggression and ensure safety may lead young people to feel obliged to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking, drug use or violence as these 'tough' behaviours are protective tools that facilitate social bonding with peers, particularly in 'rough' inner-city schools. Similarly in this study, the process of 'fitting in' with a peer group and establishing group boundaries among girls appeared to involve a level of peer abuse.

Therefore, girls' accounts in this study suggest that bullying behaviours are not always characterised by consistent disparities in power as embodied in the classic definition of bullying (Olweus 1993). Rather, the girls suggested that the repeated acts of aggression are more fluid

with regard to the bully and victim role highlighting that there are complex 'stories' of social interaction. This is particularly important as it raises the possibility of school policies actually exacerbating bullying risk by reifying the roles of 'bully' and 'victim', causing more stability in these roles than there would be otherwise. Indeed, previous research has stressed the prominence of the dual bully-victim role (Jacobson 2012). The view of bullying as characterised by disparities in power between individuals also tends to obscure its structural role in maintaining inequalities and policing acceptable roles, especially gender roles, which are highlighted by a more socio-ecological approach.

The social importance of space in the bullying context
To avoid being targeted by bullying in the school environment it was important to belong to a friendship group, but also for your group to occupy the appropriate physical 'space' in the school environment to call your own. Social groups informally occupied spaces in the school environment at Eastgrove and Crescent such as benches, corridors, lunch tables or areas in the school field and girls protected these boundaries:

> If you were to sit in someone else's bench or sit at someone else's table in the playground, that person that would normally sit there would come and they would maybe like patronise you and say that it's my place (Focus group, Crescent).

> The girls in the older years expect that if you come into their territory, they expect you to move (Focus group, Eastgrove).

Boundaries between peer groups are thus both socially, as well as spatially distributed in the school environment. Some girls suggested that mobility within the school is often restricted by your social position:

> If you don't have many friends in high places, you are restricted in the school ... you can't just go places if you don't know the right places to go for you (Focus group, Crescent School).

> The popular group would stay in the common room and the geeks will stay in the study area (Interview, Eastgrove).

> One of my friends, she was hanging out with us, she was a tag along. She told me that she did not want to interfere; she was just hanging out with us because she hasn't got anywhere to sit, to go to (Focus group, Crescent).

Girls in interviews and focus groups at both schools suggested that some spaces in the school environment were 'open', meaning they were not controlled by peer networks. These were always learning spaces such as classrooms, libraries and computer rooms which 'floaters' or 'loners' would frequent during lunch or before and after school to keep busy doing school work, reading or playing computer games:

> A lot of people they don't want to be seen as a loner, so they go to the computer, they disguise themselves either doing their homework, maybe taking a book out, just pretending to read (Focus group, Crescent).

While various practices of peer abuse such as gossip or rumours, name-calling, verbal taunting and general 'meanness' were said to happen anywhere in the school environment, girls in

focus groups and interviews suggested that physical aggression tended to be located specifically at spaces and times (before or after school and at lunch or break) that were unsupervised by teachers or other staff to avoid 'exclusion'. These were most commonly unused classrooms, toilet areas, canteens, secluded outdoor areas of the school such as the 'courts' or at bus stops or local parks just outside the school grounds.

In discussing incidents of aggressive behaviour at Eastgrove, the girls mentioned that due to 'turf wars' on school grounds (violence involving students from different neighbourhoods), the school introduced a surveillance policy where police patrolled hallways, classrooms, corridors and outdoor spaces once a week. At Crescent, some girls reported that CCTV cameras were placed just outside the toilets, although other girls in the focus group said this was a myth. Nevertheless, these surveillance approaches were considered by most students to be ineffective in deterring fights as they would be displaced to other unsupervised locations or times. Some girls expressed frustration with this approach to discipline. This is exemplified in the remarks by an older student:

> It is like they are watching to see and hope that something goes wrong so that they can do something (Interview, Eastgrove).

However, other students felt that it may be necessary to have these forms of surveillance mechanisms in place, at least for older students:

> I understand why it would be in [the mixed sex centre for 16–18 years] . . . but I do not understand why Eastgrove [12–15 years] has to have a Police Officer on the school (Interview, Eastgrove).

> I feel you are being watched all the time, but I guess sometimes it is necessary (Focus group, Crescent).

Girls in both interviews and focus groups suggested that the motivation to bully others was often to showcase 'toughness', 'status' or to build and maintain a reputation. It was important therefore, that physical fights or verbal confrontations occurred at places and times where there were crowds of students:

> When you have a crowd you are more likely to do it because you want people to feel like 'oh did you see what happened' but when you are in a secluded place with only 10 people around you it is not going to be news, so people just want it to be a bit of news (Focus group, Eastgrove).

In sum, the data points to the social importance of space in the context of bullying. While Giddens (1990, p. 21) is emphatic that routine patterns of behaviour are structured temporally and spatially, he challenges the salience of localised or situated sociality in a period of late modernity whereby social interactions are said to have become disembedded from local contexts and 'restructured across indefinite spaces of time-space'. From this perspective, it can be argued that in late modernity experiences and interactions are increasingly technologically mediated (via online communication) rather than locally or physically situated. This process of 'disembedding' is apparent among our sample in the way in which bullying practices employ the Internet and mobile phones:

> I think it is from mobile phones, emails, all of that because gossip starts from there and then it builds up (Focus group, Crescent School).

On the other hand, accounts from girls at these schools suggest this has not altogether replaced localised or situated social interactions, which are still spatially patterned in the school environment. Indeed, Eastgrove's 2012 school bullying survey reported in their anti-bullying policy stated that 'whilst the abuse/misuse of social network sites and blackberry messenger is becoming more frequent... less that 5% of pupils have reported experiencing this' (Eastgrove anti-bullying policy).

The importance of teacher-student relationships in the bullying context
Most girls in interviews and focus groups reported that teachers were ineffective in reducing or addressing bullying in the school. According to some girls, a key factor attributed to this was teachers' narrow focus on preparing students for examinations and other assessments:

> Even when they find out [about an incident of bullying], they don't take is as something very important. As long as the grades are good and the reputation is good, that is enough for them (Focus group, Crescent).

> Compared to primary, [in] secondary you have got more responsibility so the teachers don't care and there are a lot of students to take care of compared to primary (Focus group, Crescent).

Generally, girls appeared to want more 'understanding' teachers that were available to discuss their circumstances at home, showing an obligation to students' wellbeing beyond academic achievement:

> They don't really care what happens at home, they just care about the grades and if my grades were dropping, one teacher was worried about what was happening at home and another thought I was just being really lazy . . . They should be more understanding (Focus group, Crescent).

Also, teachers at these schools may have lacked the necessary 'cultural capital' required to identify and intervene when bullying was occurring. At Eastgrove, girls explained that teachers sometimes did not intervene in incidents of bullying in schools because they were unable to differentiate the signs of a fight beginning on the basketball courts, from dancing that (African and Caribbean) girls did outdoors at break times.

> Like when it is hot days, we tend to gather in a big circle like a big crowd and people start doing the chants and dances [*girl shows dance and chant*], having fun and stuff, but so that tends to look like it [a fight] because some people are going in the middle and stuff [to dance] . . . so sometimes when there is actually a fight, teachers might brush it off as them dancing (Focus group, Eastgrove).

It appeared that as a result of teachers' narrow focus on academic attainment in these schools, some forms of bullying were often inappropriately addressed or at times, altogether ignored. This is likely linked to Education policy in England which increasingly encourages schools to maximise students' academic attainment, and this is often at the expense of their broader well-being, personal development and health (Bonell *et al*. 2014). Previous studies have consistently reported that students are more likely to feel safe or supported when they have positive relationships with teachers, characterised by providing support beyond classroom instruction (Fletcher 2009c; Jamal *et al*. 2013).

Discussion

This study presents qualitative data on the nature of school bullying from the perspective of girls. It is original in using Giddens's (1984) structuration theory to help us unpick how bullying practices in our two schools appeared to be connected to social structures in a dynamic way. Based on the accounts in this study we theorise that girls in our sample were active agents struggling for identity and desperate to 'fit in' at school, and through this socialisation process, at times used their own resources (e.g. social position, occupied spaces) to bully one another and (re)develop or maintain a social order. These practices reconstituted the social and physical environment at schools in this study, at times creating a climate of peer abuse. Importantly, these social processes of bullying unfolded across the physical spaces of the school (e.g. benches, canteen), pointing to the social importance of space in the everyday behaviours of agents. The schools in this study in turn also structured bullying practices via prevention and conflict resolution practices that identified girls as either bully or victim, masking the complex social dynamics of bullying where bully and victim roles are shifting and situated within a 'story' of social interaction. Thus, this article suggests that bullying is not always best understood in terms of stable asymmetric victim and perpetrator roles, as embodied in the classic definitions of bullying in research. The view of bullying as characterised by disparities in power between individuals also tends to obscure its structural role in maintaining inequalities and policing acceptable roles, especially gender roles, which are highlighted by a more socio-ecological approach. The pervasiveness of bullying in the schools we studied can also be set in the context of wider structural forces such as market-oriented education polices which contribute to school climates narrowly focused on attainment at the expense of physical and psychological health problems experienced by girls (Arnot *et al.* 1999).

In terms of gender, structuration is useful in exploring how sexualised bullying practices reproduce gender as a social category via the policing of bodies and sexuality among girls and overt sexual harassment from boys. Simultaneously, the schools in our sample, in not recognising these forms of peer abuse as bullying, are also involved in the production of gender in the school environment. While Giddens's theory of structuration has been useful, our findings suggest that in terms of identity construction, Giddens does not adequately recognise the continuing role that traditional gendered and sexual discourses play in structuring the identities of the schools and girls in our study. Unlike social class, gender is overt in identity work. Thus, it appears that reflexivity interacts with traditional gendered frameworks (Ashe 2004). That is, young people draw on various resources to construct self-identities, but identity is still tangled in collective processes of identification, albeit in new cultural forms.

While this exploratory study has helped to illuminate how bullying is enabled and constrained by the school environment, it is not without limitations. Above all, the study involved a very small sample of students from two schools in London, thus the findings are illustrative rather than comprehensive. While the qualitative data is highly instructive for generating theoretical insights and identifying priorities for further research, the data presented are not necessarily generalisable. Students participating in interviews or focus groups were recruited as part of a larger exploratory project examining a wide range of health behaviours, and thus data collection did not solely focus on bullying. The broader focus however enabled us to get a sense of how pervasive bullying is to girls' everyday lives as girls across interviews and focus groups identified this topic as important; thus allowing us to establish rather than assume that bullying is a key issue. As teachers recruited participants for this study our sample may not have included students from different 'social positions' in the school and voices of pro-school students may have dominated. The focus group at Eastgrove was likely

too large to facilitate an open dialogue whereby all students had the chance to contribute meaningfully. The use of focus groups may have led some participants to withhold speaking openly about their experiences in front of others with whom they have ongoing contact or who are of a different age or year group. Thus we may have missed age-based nuances, as group conversations with girls tended to emphasise shared experiences rather than contradictory views. Focus groups may also lead to impression management whereby participants tailor their views and presentation in order to influence how they are perceived by others. We also acknowledge that the lack of emphasis on stable bully and victim identities in the accounts from girls may have been an artefact of the methods used in the study. For example, the use of focus groups rather than interviews with the younger girls [12–15 years] may have resulted in girls less willing to admit to bullying or being bullied in situations where power relations in the school were actually stark and stable. Nonetheless, it is clear that there was considerable divergence between the concept of bullying implicit in school policies and the lived experiences of students. This study concentrated on peer social structures and how this was affected by the institutional structure; however to explore the latter in more depth would require data from school staff. Despite these limitations, this study adds to the growing body of evidence that illustrates how everyday experiences shape young people's behaviours and demonstrates the importance of investigating girls' perspectives of bullying. Such research is critical in informing interventions that are sensitive to the ways in which bullying is produced and reproduced through everyday interactions and spaces within schools. Further research should explore the potential for schools adopting a more holistic approach to traditional 'bullying prevention' which addresses the depth and range of peer abuse experienced by girls, recognises bullying as a dimension of ongoing relationships, and promotes positive and healthy interactions between students and between teachers and students.

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