

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# A sociology of bullying: Placing youth aggression in social context

Christopher Donoghue<sup>1</sup>  | C.J. Pascoe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sociology, Montclair State University,  
Montclair, New Jersey, USA

<sup>2</sup>Sociology, University of Oregon, Eugene,  
Oregon, USA

**Correspondence**

Christopher Donoghue, Sociology, Montclair  
State University, 1 Normal Avenue, Montclair,  
NJ 07043, USA.

Email: [donoghuec@montclair.edu](mailto:donoghuec@montclair.edu)

**Abstract**

In this paper we review the sociological literature on peer aggression among adolescents and demonstrate how it can form the basis of a new subfield in sociology on the subject of bullying. Although sociologists have mostly avoided the term bullying in classic works on adolescent aggression, these studies suggest that institutional social control, status hierarchies and social inequalities provide important social context for youth aggression. While historically they have not been in dialog with each other, when taken together sociological research on youth status relations and social networks, systemic bias, school culture and social ecology can lay the foundation of a sociology of bullying. We suggest that if sociologists see this work as shedding light on issues of bullying, they can begin to play a larger role in the shaping of the national conversation on bullying and influence anti-bullying programs in schools to take better account of the social dimensions of bullying.

**KEYWORDS**

aggression, bullying, culture, education, gender, sex, gender, and sexuality, social issues, sociology of family and friendships

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Contemporary popular and academic discourses on American youth often name bullying as a serious social problem. Bullying, for instance, has been cited as a cause of school-based mass shootings like those in Littleton, Colorado (Cullen, 2004), Paducah, Kentucky (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003) and Uvalde, Texas (Bogel-Burroughs, 2022). Bullying is also pointed to as a cause of youth suicide. Tyler Clementi, for instance, died of suicide after a fellow student who had filmed him kissing another male student shared the video on social media. Similarly, Amanda Todd died of suicide after sharing a video in which she used flash cards to tell others about how she had been victimized by bullying at

school. Bullying, in both popular and academic reports, is depicted as a ubiquitous social problem with devastating effects.

As part of the response to bullying and the toll it can take on young people, formal and informal anti-bullying programs are now common in American public schools. From kindness clubs, to big buddies, to formal assemblies, many students now encounter some type of anti-bullying program at some point in their academic careers. Anti-bullying programs, new school personnel, and rigid state laws have also marked this anti-bullying movement, as has a growing industry of therapists and psychiatrists who aim to properly treat bullies and victims to alleviate the negative health consequences that stem from aggression (Munsey, 2012). Most of these school based programs are guided by what psychologists have learned about individual predispositions toward bullying and the psychosocial conditions in school environments that foster unkind behavior at school (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Some anti-bullying curricula are linked to larger securitization efforts in schools and tie process of reporting and consequences to local law enforcement (Messman et al., 2022).

Meta-analyses have shown that the impact of these curricula on bullying behaviors in schools has been uneven, with most programs showing only small positive effects (Lee et al., 2015; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). There is also a need for more research on programs with greater scientific merit (Della Cippa et al., 2015), as well as targeted studies on at-risk students and those already getting victimized (Nickerson, 2019). Existing research shows, however, that certain anti-bullying program components are more effective than others (Lee et al., 2015). Namely, programs that incorporate a whole school approach to bullying that includes training for students, teachers, parents and others are widely seen as most effective (Bradshaw, 2015; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Social network research also suggests that schools can reduce bullying with the help of highly connected students that can influence their peers by promoting anticonflict behavior (Paluck et al., 2016). In other words, focusing on the social, network and institutional aspects of bullying show more promise than those that focus more on individual characteristics.

The anti-bullying movement in schools has been informed by decades of psychological research (Olweus, 1978, 1993). Far less about bullying has been written in sociological journals. At first glance this seems surprising as there is a rich tradition in sociology of studying schools, youth culture and interpersonal interaction. But this seemingly muted sociological response might simply be a difference in the terms chosen by the researchers. Sociologists of youth and education often describe their work using terms like generalized or peer aggression, and they rarely identify young people in specific roles like, bullies, victims, bully-victims or observers.

Examples of classic sociological books on adolescent aggression that do not use terms related specifically to bullying include Eder, Evans & Parker's (1995) *School Talk* in which children were found using harsh verbal aggression as a weapon for policing gender norms; Milner's (2004) *Freaks and Geeks and Cool Kids*, which aimed to explain why young people enact surprising cruelties against one another at school; Crosnoe's (2011) *Fitting In and Standing Out*, in which we see the harmful long term effects that high school students face when they are rejected by their peers; and Pascoe's (2011) *Dude, you're a Fag* in which young boys are observed getting abused by their peers for failing to successfully demonstrate their masculinity. This is not to say that no sociological works address bullying. Two notable exceptions include Jessie Klein's (2012) *Bully Society* and Charles Derber and Yale Magrass' (2017) *Bully Nation*. However, these two works, like other sociological approaches to peer aggression, are removed from the extensive empirical research on bullying which spans multiple disciplines.

To what can we attribute this trend? One explanation may be that sociologists think too much focus is already being paid to this one highly situational form of negative behavior, when there are so many other forms of aggression that also require their attention. This line of thinking may suggest that by engaging explicitly with the interdisciplinary research on bullying, sociologists may add to what some might consider a moral panic about bullying (Barron & Lacombe, 2005). Some scholars and scholarship suggests that bullying may not even be on the rise, and that national rates of bullying have remained steady over the past decade (Li et al., 2020). We may instead just be seeing an inflation of the use of the term bullying to include behaviors that do not really fit the traditional definition of the word, but simply refer to disagreement or incivility (Pascoe, 2013) or, conversely, more serious forms of aggression like group-based violence (Collins, 2011). For instance, the word bullying has been used to describe the way a powerful

sports teams runs up the score on weaker opponents; and various groups have been described as victims of bullying such as Christians when LGBTQ folks protest for equal rights.

Rather than fanning the flames of a moral panic, we suggest that developing a sociological approach to bullying could, in fact, build on what existing research suggests is most effective in stemming youth aggression in schools by providing coherent research that takes into account interactionist approaches and attention to networks and institutions. In the article, "Notes on a Sociology of Bullying," C.J. Pascoe suggests that a sociology of bullying would focus less on individual level variables that predict bullying or victimization and more on the interaction that constitutes bullying itself and claims that bullying is a way that larger social inequalities are reproduced interactionally (Pascoe, 2013). In this paper we build on these insights to not only make a case for a sociology of bullying, but also to develop a framework around existing sociological research. Indeed, several areas of sociological research have already laid a firm foundation for future work on the sociology of bullying. Namely, we will draw connections between Milner's (2004) theory of status relations, social network theory on instrumental aggression (Faris & Ennett, 2012; Faris & Tucker, 2022; Li & Wright, 2014), ethnographic work on systemic bias in schools, and a modified form of the social ecological perspective for understanding bullying in schools (Migliaccio & Raskauskas, 2016). All these research areas share a concern with the welfare of children involved in peer aggression, but only some are connected to the broader multidisciplinary literature on bullying. By organizing these sociological contributions, we aim to pave the way for more expansive research on bullying that more fully incorporates the sociological imagination and suggests that bullying isn't just a problem of youth nor is it separate from other aspects of the social world.

## 2 | DEFINING BULLYING

According to the psychologist Dan Olweus (1978, 1993), bullying involves multiple acts of intentional aggression against a person or group under conditions in which the aggressor holds power over the victim. Identifying and measuring bullying among children has proven challenging, however, as it can take so many different forms. Physically aggressive acts may include unsolicited touch, pinching, pushing, punching, kicking, or shoving. Non-contact physical aggression may include damaging or stealing someone's belongings, pretending to harm them or tricking or cheating them out of something. Children also aggress verbally by making threats, teasing and name calling. Sometimes this aggression takes the form of cyberbullying via text, social media posts, discussion boards or video games. Young folks can also engage in relational aggression by isolating an individual from others, often involving spreading lies and rumors.

The Olweus definition has stood the test of time despite its weaknesses which have been highlighted in multiple critiques. Some have contended, for example, that the definition is too restrictive, that it is too hard to discern intention, that the concept of a power differential is an overly subjective criteria and that children do not use words resembling those in the Olweus definition when they describe behavior they consider to be bullying (Carrera et al., 2011; Cascardi et al., 2014; Chan, 2009; Cheng et al., 2011; Cunningham et al., 2010; DeLara, 2012; Donoghue et al., 2015; Donoghue & Raia-Hawrylak, 2016; Harger, 2016; Mishna, 2004; Monks & Smith, 2006; Stein, 2002; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). As psychological research on bullying has evolved, scholars have also indicated that bullying should be seen as goal-driven behavior (Volk et al., 2014). This is in line with the view that bullying is an adaptive strategy, contrary to the more traditional assumption that bullying is a sign of maladaptation among adolescents (Volk et al., 2012). The development of a sociological approach to bullying, one that focuses on the social, rather than the individual dimensions of peer aggression, can provide alternatives to the widely used Olweus approach, one that is in need of more development and revision.

## 3 | DO WE NEED A SOCIOLOGY OF BULLYING?

From a certain point of view, the answer to the question of whether more sociological research on bullying is needed may simply be no because there is already a rich literature in sociology on aggression among youth. Some may even

wonder if a more expansive use of the term bullying might weaken the impact of research on aggression by dividing sociological contributions into different camps where some focus on the term, "bullying," and others concentrate on aggression more generally. Sociologists themselves may prefer to avoid the term bullying because it invokes a binary understanding of individuals and interactions as healthy or pathological. But sociologists are, and have been, studying bullying even when they do not use the term directly. While sociologists may avoid the term bullying itself, sociological research on peer aggression clearly highlights issues of institutional social control, status hierarchies and gendered, raced and classed inequalities, which, when taken together provide insight on the *social* dimensions of bullying, rather than the *individual* dimensions emphasized by most bullying research.

Some sociological research highlights the way that schools function as institutions of social control that give rise to bullying behavior itself. For example, in *The Adolescent Society*, James Coleman (1961) made the observation that young people in schools find themselves to be severely cut off from access to adult life. They generally don't enjoy going to school and they would far prefer to engage in activities they find more stimulating like playing sports or listening to music. Much like prisoners or low-ranking soldiers in the military, children are subject to rules and regulations over which they have little control but to which they are expected to adhere. So when youth "act out" at school this "acting out" can be understood as a collective rejection of those expectations. For Coleman, this organization of young people's lives actually structures interactions that we would now call bullying. That is, some groups of students, nerds or geeks say, may follow these rules without objection. Other, less compliant, groups of students may intimidate or attack the rule followers, perhaps weakening their example and encouraging their peers to similarly reject the rule followers. This would suggest that adolescent aggression may be both structured by and a reaction to the social control of youth themselves. Nevertheless, current evidence suggests that an authoritative approach to bullying by teachers can be effective when it incorporates both fair and consistent rule enforcement and support in the form of positive and caring relationships between teachers and students (Gregory et al., 2010.; Thomas et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Several decades after Coleman's work, Murray Milner's (2004) *Freaks and Geeks and Cool Kids* would contend that the harsh limits placed on young people's actions also facilitate bullying. Taken together, this research suggests that the institutions of social control that govern youth, themselves, in part, create the social context for bullying. This attention to the role of institutional context and social control provides a central building block for a sociology of bullying.

The institutional and status-based dimensions of bullying permeate popular representations of youth aggression. In the 2021 adaptation of *West Side Story* when Riff and other members of The Jets (all White Americans) threaten Tony because of his reluctance to take part in the gang's plan to engage in armed combat against The Sharks (Puerto Ricans living in New York City), Tony may win the sympathies of the audience by insisting they "play it cool" and fight with just their fists, but he becomes the object of scorn and physical threats from his former friends for suggesting such a straight path. In the 1984 film, *The Revenge of the Nerds*, a group of young computer science college students are intimidated and victimized by pranks and violence at the hands of the football team which also share a collective disinterest and rejection of the norms and rules expected of them at school. All of the leading male cast members of *The Big Bang Theory* also describe countless experiences with getting severely bullied as children interested in science, and in their adult lives they are portrayed as later finding it humorous. Like most popular media forms about bullying, these portrayals are riddled with confusing and misleading stereotypes about how and why these aggressive behaviors take place. There is also often a hyper focus on physical violence and the audience is led to believe that victims can overcome these challenges, laugh at them later, or even become highly successful later in life because of what they endured. While all of these things are possible, they are also idealistic and may be sending the message that getting bullied is something like a rite of passage that can help one to grow emotionally or intellectually in their lives.

*School Talk*, by Donna Eder, Catherine Evans, and Stephen Parker (1995) draws out the gendered dimensions of school-based bullying and aggression. In this ethnography, middle school boys and girls deploy sometimes graphic language and intense social pressure to convey social norms about gender and adherence to the expectations of the unwritten rules about school hierarchy. Boys aggressively pressured other boys that they perceived to be weak or not living up to ideal masculine standards and they objectified the girls in the school. Girls were likewise seen using

gossip to disparage other girls that were not living by acceptable standards of attractiveness and femininity. Many studies have since confirmed gender differences in bullying as well as their association to gender inequality (Cosma et al., 2022; Rosen & Nofziger, 2019).

This sort of gendered aggression permeates pop culture storylines. In movies like *Mean Girls* and *Easy A*, teenage girls use many sordid cruelties to enact revenge on girls that are deemed to not fit in. In other films like *A Christmas Story* and *The Karate Kid* young boys that are deemed weak or wimpy suffer physical violence at the hands of stronger boys. Gender stereotypes run rampant in these films, and when viewed from a contemporary lens, they also lack an awareness of their powerful heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions. But this is normal in media, and in real life settings where it is hard for some individuals to understand the possibility that their own behavior may contain bias. It can even be difficult to see gender or sexual preference bias when we are observing other people that are using it, as C.J. Pascoe (2011) found in *Dude You're a Fag*, in which adolescents are surprisingly found to be using slurs normally associated with homophobia or hate toward homosexuals, but not for the purpose of criticizing their sexual preference. Instead, Pascoe found that high school boys deployed what she called "a fag discourse" to disparage others for not engaging in gender performances that were adequately masculine.

Finally, sociological research can show that the harms of bullying go beyond the individual and are deeply connected to the social world. For example, factors such as income inequality, race and ethnicity have all been linked to bullying behaviors in schools across many nations (Elgar et al., 2009, 2015; Vitoroulis & Vaillancourt, 2018). Ethnic and racial differences among both students and peer educators have also been found to correspond with the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs (Bauer et al., 2007; Zambuto et al., 2022). Students of a lower social class and those that have fewer friends than their peers have been found to be more vulnerable to bullying (Qorbani et al., 2022; Sletten, 2010). Recent evidence also suggests that students of lower socioeconomic status may also be more likely to victimize others (Torchyian et al., 2022).

These linkages between social factors and bullying perpetration and victimization suggest that the sociological perspective is an essential component of understanding matters like these, and schools need their input when searching for solutions. When framed sociologically, bullying can be seen as a harm-inducing social fact that takes place against a backdrop of contextual realities that are of equal importance to the pathological motivations for bullying that people seem to relate to the most. As Pascoe (2013) argued, sociologists should:

frame these aggressive interactions not necessarily as the product of pathological individuals who are ill-adjusted socially, but as the interactional reproduction of larger structural inequalities. A sociology of bullying would shift the unit of analysis from the individual to the aggressive interaction itself, attend to the social contexts in which bullying occurs, ask questions about meanings produced by such interactions and understand these interactions as not solely the province of young people.

In the remainder of this paper, we will consider important strands of sociological research that have taken on the subject of peer aggression and bullying more directly as the unit of analysis. Specifically, we will demonstrate how theories on children and youth regarding status relations and social networks, systemic bias, school culture and social ecology can form the basis for expanded inquiry into the sociology of bullying.

## 4 | STATUS RELATIONS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Behavioral research in sociology is often focused on what is normal about an activity given the circumstances, rather than what makes someone exceptional or cruel for engaging in it. Social psychologists refer to this approach, in which one attends more closely to situational factors than to personality-based reasons for behavior, as one that avoids the fundamental attribution error (Heider, 1958; Ross, 1977). By taking this approach to bullying, sociologists can sometimes seem as if they do not hold aggressive children worthy of blame for their actions, but as Milner (2004) showed in his classic ethnography of high school students, there is much to be learned from examining the social

context within which these cruel acts take place in schools. Much like the way Goffman (1961) understood that actors in total institutions like prisons and psychiatric hospitals are driven by motivations that stem from their social environments (and not just their personality types), Milner realized that children in schools were subject to severe everyday constraints that also affected their behaviors.

Similar to institutionalized patients, children in schools lack power or control over their social environments (Corsaro, 2018; Thorne, 1993). Most of their other freedoms are restricted, including their choices about what kinds of social reward systems they may participate in, like academic honors, talent shows or athletic competitions. Under these conditions, Milner noticed they often use what little autonomy they do have to create informal reward systems like popularity contests or membership in a desirable clique. Competition for these informal rewards can be intense and unregulated by adults, and they can lead some to carry out surprising acts of aggression. Children tend to sort one another into hierarchical levels in these reward systems, and unlike the stereotype in which the strongest members at the top aggress against the weakest ones at the bottom, Milner predicted it would be the adolescents in the middle who would be more likely to aggress against their weaker peers in order to boost themselves up. Much like in the Indian Caste System, Milner observed that young people would often avoid even the slightest appearance of an association between themselves and those they thought were too far beneath them.

This application of the theory of status relations suggests that we might find solutions to problems like bullying by working to improve the culture of our educational institutions, rather than focusing so narrowly on how to teach bullies to behave and not harm their peers. It also indicates that trying to promote a contrived school ethos against bullying for children to follow at school, as many anti-bullying programs do, may not be enough to actually deter children from aggressing against one another. As Collins (2011) observed, children are often much more knowledgeable about their own situation than adults give them credit for, and schools run the risk of having their policies completely ignored when children deem them to be ignorant of the problems they face.

Milner's work deepened sociological interest in adolescent status competitions, but it was based on very limited ethnographic research. Social network theorists have since found more thorough evidence for some of his expectations about instrumental aggression, as well as other indications that common stereotypes about bullying roles and behaviors are often misguided. Fundamentally, social network theorists begin with the assumption that pathological explanations for aggressive behavior fall short when considered outside of the social context in which they occur. So unlike in the Olweus definition of bullying in which intentionality and repetition of an aggressive behavior are assumed to be readily observable, social network theorists contend that that a host of other invisible factors like power, standing and positionality can all serve to obfuscate the meanings behind what we see in bullying interactions.

Bullying has been conceptualized as an instrumental act of aggression in the work of some social network theorists. Evidence shows that bullying others can raise one's standing among their peers, especially when the aggressor possesses a high degree of network centrality (Faris & Felmlee, 2011, 2014; Felmlee & Faris, 2016). These well positioned students are characterized by their possession of many connections to other students and groups. They may also hold a great deal of power, but that is not always the case. In fact, powerful students get bullied too and they can suffer consequences just as severe as that experienced by weaker students (Faris & Ennett, 2012). Those with greater network centrality also have friends that they may victimize by bullying as well (Callejas, 2022). The most prime situation in which young people bully one another may be when they are in a middling status and they are aiming to work their way up to a higher level. Students below this social rung have less wherewithal to use bullying for status attainment and those that have achieved the highest level of status have a decreased need for it (Faris, 2012; Faris & Felmlee, 2011).

## 5 | SYSTEMIC BIAS IN SCHOOLS AND BULLYING

Young people also face challenges when their social interactions with others take place within systems of systemic bias, such as heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and racism. Many anti-bullying programs aim to bring targeted relief

to students who are perceived to be at the highest risk of victimization, namely those with disabilities, LGBTQ students and ethnic and racial minorities. This is a rational approach to addressing the problem, but these efforts sometimes have unintended consequences that can make matters much worse for the groups they aim to protect (Smith & Payne, 2022).

Evidence of problems like these can be found in ethnographic studies that shine light on the ironic failures of policies and programs that harm the victims they were intended to support. For example, in a recent study by Pascoe (2022), school authorities were found to be discouraging LGBTQ celebrations out of fears that they might embarrass trans students that were not yet out at school, even though the celebration was being put on by a group of queer students themselves. That is, in an attempt to protect LGBTQ youth from the anticipated harm of peer harassment, the school authorities actually caused harm by preventing them from celebrating their identities. This approach may keep them safe in some circumstances, but it can undermine their ability to express themselves and gain acceptance from their peers on their own.

Gender biases can also undermine anti-bullying efforts. In Miller's (2022) ethnographic research on anti-bullying programs, we see cases where dangerously misleading messages about gender are used to teach young people not to aggress against one another. In one of the two anti-bullying programs explored in the study, young girls are seen teaching their female peers that girls are their own worst enemies and that they could solve their problems by simply not being so mean to one another. Little if any attention is paid in the curriculum to the roles played by boys in their conflicts. In the other program described in the study, adults are seen advising girls not to send nudes of themselves to boys because they should expect they will get posted on the Internet. Meanwhile, boys in the same workshop are taught not to aggress against others simply because the days have passed when boys could have gotten away with it.

Problems like these in anti-bullying curricula and programs may stem from the unequal positions held by children in schools based on their categories of differentness. Payne and Smith (2018) have called for an infusion of the sociological perspective into school programming to raise awareness about the harms that systemic bias and inequality bring to school settings (Smith & Payne, 2022). In their efforts to influence school policies on bullying, they have aimed to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Rather than aiming to just punish bad actors or bullies, they advocate for a more holistic approach to changing norms and reducing the oppression of groups that are deemed to be out of the norm.

## 6 | SCHOOL CULTURE AND SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL THEORY

The previous section documents the way sociological approaches to inequality can shift the discussion about bullying. This attention to inequality may be fruitfully combined with a more psychological approach, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological perspective. The social ecological model is a systems theory that is effective for understanding bullying because it goes beyond the dyadic relationship between the bully and the victim to explanations for aggression that include the interrelationships between micro (e.g. familial units), meso (e.g. school communities) and macro (e.g. societal) level groups of individuals in a social environment (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Psychologists use the theory as a rationale for involving not only children in school anti-bullying programs, but also their parents, teachers and school administrators.

In psychological research, however, the social ecological theory of bullying is mainly conceptualized unidirectionally as a system in which higher level groups, like school personnel, influence the lower level groups, or students. This way of thinking is evident in the "whole school" anti-bullying programs that train adults to become good influences on children. But in Migliaccio and Raskauskas' (2016) *Bullying as a Social Experience*, a more sociologically inspired application of the theory is advanced. In their modified social ecological theory, the authors extend focus to the ways in which the young actors respond to their own perceptions of differentness among their peers. While it is true that areas of differentness such as race and gender are given meaning by the larger spheres around them, young people have their own perceptions and interactions that can create new dynamics of meaning on their own. Dynamics like



these may have their own separate influences on school culture and shared understandings of power in schools. In this way, the social construction of differentness among the adolescents can affect the broader culture of the school itself, and not just the other way around.

In another theory that Shepherd (2022) calls the interactionist norm account of culture, a similar argument is made for the ability of adolescents to participate in student-driven culture making as they influence their own cultural norms through their interactions with others. Like the modified social ecological theory, this paradigm grants equal weight to child influences on their own experience and attitudes, as that which is paid to adult-driven socialization efforts in programs like anti-bullying curricula. As young people in schools engage (or choose not to engage) in aggressive interaction, they wield influences over their peers. Through their actions, they create values for what is acceptable and what is not acceptable behavior, and over time they create their own cultural trends and belief systems. In some cases, as Shepherd's data shows, adolescents themselves can create effective anti-bullying codes of behavior quite on their own and without much help from adults.

## 7 | WHAT MIGHT THE SOCIOLOGY OF BULLYING LOOK LIKE IN THE FUTURE?

The goal of this review is to position sociology as a source of important insights on bullying that have so far been given little consideration in mainstream research and public conversations on the topic. Sociologists approach bullying from a different starting point than most other researchers, namely the social context, and this leads to insights that are often missed when we rely too much on pathological explanations for aggressive adolescent behavior. To be clear, psychological factors such as mental health and personality are demonstrably linked to bullying behaviors. But if one's objective is to understand them more fully, and to develop interventions to reduce the harm they cause to others, it is necessary to adequately consider them in the broader context in which they occur.

Sociological research is important for conceptualizing the ways that change can occur from the bottom up (peers influencing one another) and not just from the top down (school administrators disciplining children); it is also important for revealing the nature of status relations, inequalities of power and influence, the impact of systemic forms of bias and more. By organizing and advancing a more extensive body of research and knowledge on the sociology of bullying from its various perspectives, sociologists hold great potential in their ability to add understanding of the social context around bullying, reduce the effects of harmful stereotypes about it, and improve anti-bullying curricula in schools. A sociology of bullying brings together research on youth aggression to draw attention to the social dimensions of bullying drawing on insights regarding status relations and social networks, systemic bias, school culture and social ecology. In doing so a sociology of bullying can provide social context for the problem of bullying, a problem that is often dealt with in terms of research and activism as an individual one.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

### ORCID

Christopher Donoghue  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9322-1173>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Christopher Donoghue** is Associate Professor and graduate program coordinator in the Department of Sociology at Montclair State University in New Jersey. His research spans adolescent bullying, sex education, and ethnic and racial prejudice, and has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Adolescence*, *Sex Education*, *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth*, *Children and Schools*, *Qualitative Research in Education*, *Sociological Forum*, and the *Social Science Journal*. He is the Editor of *The Sociology of Bullying: Power, Status and Aggression among Adolescents* and the co-author of *Statistics: A Tool for Social Research and Data Analysis, 11e* with Joseph Healey. Prior to his work on young people, his focus was on older adults, disabilities, and long-term care facilities. This work has appeared in journals such as *The Gerontologist*, *Research on Aging*, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *Health Care Management Review*, *Journal of Health and Social Policy*, and *Disability and Society*.

**C. J. Pascoe** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon. She is the author of *Nice is Not Enough: Inequality and the Limits of Kindness at American High* and the award-winning book *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*.

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