

# Bullies: Thugs or thinkers?

**I**N February 1996, 16-year-old Katherine Morrison killed herself. Two schoolmates, Shelley McBratney and Lee Ann Murray, were put on trial for common assault. In the eyes of many, they were being accused of bullying Katherine to death. The *Daily Record* branded the girls 'Bitches from Hell', and the sheriff at the trial called them 'contemptible and cowardly' and said they had acted 'evilily'. There were claims that Shelley was jealous of Katherine's academic achievements, and ashamed of her own inadequacies. Shelley's mother had a different view: she felt that the tragic incident was simply a falling out between close friends, and she said that 'Shelley was bullied by the press. She was bullied by the court. She was bullied by everyone. That was the real bullying' (*The Guardian*, 25 April 1998).

Conflicting opinions in the explanation of aggression are not new. The public, the media, even psychologists: all have a tendency to stigmatise and pathologise individuals involved in threatening behaviour as psychologically and socially abnormal or deficient. But *is* bullying a pathological behaviour found only in a minority, or is it in fact a common identity choice actively chosen at certain times because it makes sense in certain social environments? Are the children involved inadequate, or could they be considered socially competent... even superior?

## A social anti-social act?

The search for an answer to the question of whether bullies are social inadequates or skilled manipulators starts with the nature of bullying. Not the nature of aggression, which is often reactive, hot-headed and one-on-one. I am talking about bullying, the *systematic abuse of power* (Smith & Sharp, 1994). This abuse can occur in homes, schools and workplaces right across the lifespan, but here I concentrate on the classroom and playground experiences of bullying that can have such a profound and prolonged effect on both victim and perpetrator.

Bullying has been referred to as violence in a group context in which pupils reinforce others' behaviour in their interaction (Pikas, 1975), and the collective character and importance of social relationships are often emphasised (Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1982). It tends to take



At the Centenary Annual Conference **JON SUTTON** described the work that won him the 1999 Award for Outstanding Doctoral Research Contributions to Psychology.

place in a social setting: peers are present in 85 per cent of bullying episodes (Pepler & Craig, 1995). One half of female-to-female and one third of male-to-male bullying takes place within a friendship network (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1997).

Within this social context, bullying often uses social and indirect methods. Bullies leave people out of groups or spread nasty gossip, and with the natural age progression towards more sophisticated and indirect bullying (Rivers & Smith, 1994) methods can even include creating 'furtive alliances' and the use of entrapment (Thomas-Peter, 1997).

## Social inadequacy?

So are children who bully unpopular outcasts, social inadequates who resort to violence because they don't know how to interact properly? They have certainly been described as less intelligent, the 'oafs of literature tormenting the school swot' (Besag, 1989). This dyadic relationship, characterised by a mental and physical imbalance of power, has been popularised by Dennis the Menace and Walter the softy in the *Beano*, and the thuggish bully Gripper and fat, bespectacled victim Roland in the 1980s kids' TV programme *Grange Hill*.

According to Randall (1997, p.23), 'bullies do not process social information accurately and seem unable to make realistic judgements about the intentions of other people'. They 'fail to understand the feelings of others' and 'have little awareness of what other children actually think of them... a symptom of their social blindness'. Such views largely stem from the social skills deficit model of aggression (see Crick & Dodge, 1994), which sees aggression as resulting from biases at one or more points in a process of social information processing (SIP) – encoding, interpretation, goal selection, response generation, response selection, and behavioural enactment. Following this perspective, a variety of studies of

antisocial, aggressive and 'hard to manage' children have revealed deficits or 'biases' in social perspective taking or social insight (see e.g. Happé & Frith, 1996).

## Skilled manipulation?

I think that views of social cognition and bullying have been too firmly based on the aggression literature, failing to take into account the social context and methods of bullying. Much of the evidence still comes from exclusively male samples, and studies dealing explicitly with aggressive behaviour and clinical populations. We will not achieve a reliable picture of the applicability of the SIP approach until a variety of measures are used with a range of subgroups of bullying children who might be expected to use social cognition in their behaviour. Little research has attempted this approach, although Björkqvist *et al.* (2000) have found that social intelligence is indeed positively and most strongly related to indirect aggression.

Just as it is important to recognise that children with conduct problems are a notoriously heterogeneous group, we should also not treat social skills or mentalising as a unitary concept: children may have a very good 'theory of nasty minds', or 'cold cognition' (Mealey, 1995): a gap between understanding thoughts and feelings. This is a familiar concept within the field of Machiavellianism (the high Machiavellian 'appraises a situation logically and cognitively rather than emotionally': Christie & Geis, 1970, p.85), and also psychopathy. While not all bullies are budding psychopaths, the possibility of emotionless manipulators is obviously a serious one in a school environment.

In Sutton *et al.* (1999b) we investigated the cognitive/emotion distinction in a 'theory of mind' framework – the ability of individuals to attribute mental states to themselves and others in order to explain and predict behaviour. A well-developed theory of mind, with a good grasp of the

mental states and emotions of others and an understanding that they may act on false beliefs, could be a particularly useful skill in certain kinds of bullying: spreading gossip, social exclusion, organising gangs and avoiding detection.

We distinguished 'Bullies' from their 'Assistants' and 'Reinforcers', as well as 'Defenders', 'Outsiders' and 'Victims'. Each child, therefore, had six continuous role scores, reflecting level of involvement in each behaviour, and one main participant role, reflecting what they did most. These scores and roles were then related to performance on a set of 11 stories, assessing understanding of cognitive false beliefs (four stories) and false-belief-based emotion (seven stories – see Box).

Surprisingly, given the persistent 'social inadequates' stereotype, Bullies scored

higher than any other participant role: significantly higher than Victims, Followers (Assistants plus Reinforcers) and Defenders (controlling for age and verbal ability). The continuous bully role score was positively correlated with social cognition score (as well as with both cognitive score and emotion score when taken separately). In contrast, Victim score was negatively correlated with social cognition – perhaps it is victims' lack of mentalising ability that puts them at the bottom of the pecking order.

### But are these children 'socially competent'?

Even if we accept that at least some children who bully might be considered 'socially skilled' in terms of theory of mind performance, could they be considered

'socially competent'? Much of our debates with Crick and Dodge (Sutton *et al.*, 1999a; 1999c) and Arsenio and Lemerise (Sutton *et al.*, 2001) centres on this question. Arsenio and Lemerise appear to be arguing that being socially competent involves maximising shared standards concerning what is 'fair' or 'right'. This might be 'social conformity', 'socially acceptable behaviour' or even 'moral behaviour', but it is not 'social competence' as we understand it.

A 'socially conforming' behaviour taking account of 'shared standards' might include shooting prisoners in Nazi concentration camps (conforming to Gestapo shared standards) or imprisoning suffragettes (conforming to society standards at the beginning of the 20th century). Such persons might or might not be 'socially competent'. Gandhi did not conform to 'shared standards' in his protests – but was he not 'socially competent'? Couldn't someone who was excellent at worming their way into another's affections in order to con them out of money be described as socially competent?

Social competence should not just be defined in culturally specific forms related to generally shared standards within that culture. It is success at attaining individual goals, or even 'effectiveness in interaction' (Rose-Krasnor, 1997), though the individual must often take the social context they are in into account in order to achieve this. It may be time to ask what view of social competence children themselves take, as this is likely to be of more practical use in intervention. If you consider the school or playground as a self-contained culture (Sluckin, 1981), that particular culture might have quite different definitions of what is socially competent or 'effective' interaction, and bullying may be considered more socially competent than 'being a weakling'.

Understanding of bullying and the development of interventions could be hampered by imposing adult moral standards on to consideration of the behaviour and the individual. Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) describe bullying as 'developmentally incompetent because of the kinds of long term emotional and relational difficulties that it produces for...bullies' (p.71). Boys who bully are, as a whole, more likely to gain criminal convictions as adults (Olweus, 1993). But this is not necessarily indicative of emotional and relational difficulties – longitudinal research is needed on differential long-term effects of bullying

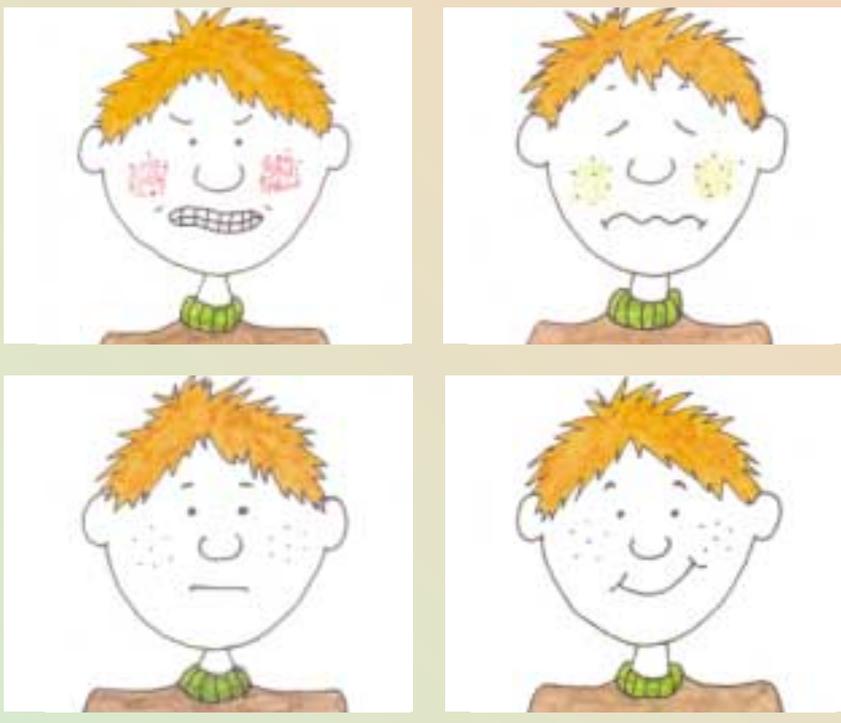
## ASSESSING UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTION BASED ON FALSE BELIEF

Mike wants to go out with his friends, but he has a really bad tummy ache. He knows that if his mum notices he's ill, she won't let him go out to play. Mike goes downstairs and asks his mum 'Can I go out to play please?'

Which picture shows how Mike really feels?

Which picture shows how Mike will look when he talks to his mum?

To get full marks, a child would indicate that although Mike really feels ill (top right) he will conceal this by looking happy or at least neutral (bottom pics) so that his mum doesn't know that he's ill. This would show the child can understand that an appropriate display of emotion can create a belief in another than differs from reality.



on the bullies, related to gender and type of bullying.

It is also questionable whether, as Arsenio and Lemerise state, 'most other adults and children view [bullying] as distinctly incompetent' (p.71). In fact, a significant number of adults despise victims and have pro-bully attitudes (Eslea & Smith, 2000), and many children admire some bullies and aggressive children (Cairns & Cairns, 1991). Most adults and children no doubt see bullying as socially undesirable, but this is not the same as considering it incompetent.

### Why do children bully?

So perhaps not all bullies should be considered social inadequates or incompetents. Perhaps we feel protected by assuming that bullying is an unusual behaviour that has a cause located squarely within the individual. This attributional bias is common across many domains of behaviour (see Hewstone, 1983), and it does serve important psychological functions. However, I would suggest it is vital to bear such tendencies in mind when considering research and evaluating the psychological theories behind anti-bullying policies. As tempting as it may be simply to demonise the individuals involved, greater understanding will only arise from further systematic and scientific study of sociocultural and interpersonal factors and the motivations to bully they create.

So what are these motivations? Dodge *et al.* (1997) found that proactively aggressive children expected aggression to be an easy and effective social strategy, and that they would feel more emotionally positive than all other children after initiating aggression. Arsenio and Lemerise (2001) note that 'most of the unique features of proactively aggressive children converge on their 'values' and 'valuing

processes' regarding aggression, namely 'it's easy, it works, and it makes me feel good.'" (p.64). Considering motivations like these within the social cognition framework might both provide clearer theoretical understanding of bullying, and ultimately lead to a more effective set of techniques for dealing with it.

**'It's easy, it works...'** Most social environments throughout the lifespan contain ample opportunities for bullying. Power relationships are ubiquitous, and easy to abuse in one way or another. In terms of social cognition, it is a small step from thinking about what other people are thinking to actually manipulating these thoughts, a handy skill in certain indirect types of bullying. Such methods are difficult for observers to detect, and many children who are bullied tell no one.

A motivation related to the ease of bullying is the fact that in many cases it works. Rewards for the bully are not just in terms of having some extra dinner money: they can be social in terms of reputation enhancement and friendships. In my PhD, all role scores except Outsider and Victim were positively correlated with level of popularity, as measured by percentage of best friend nominations from same sex classmates – in other words, the more involved in bullying, the more popular the child. Going on this measure, Bullies were the second most popular group – encouragingly, behind Defenders.

A good demonstration of the socially contextual advantages of being aggressive can be found in Pellegrini and Bartini's (2001) study of dominance in early adolescent boys. They show how some boys use aggressive behaviour to establish dominance relationships, especially in the transition from primary to middle school as they enter new peer groups. Once dominance is established, aggression declines. Dominance later relates both to affiliation and to heterosexual dating. Here, it seems, adolescents are using aggression in a socially competent way to achieve individual goals – status in the peer group, and later to impress the opposite sex via that status.

So it makes sense to them – it might not to us, but it does to them. Bullying is just one of a range of interrelated strategies available to create a reputation. Looking more generally at social competition in school (Sutton & Keogh, 2000), I found that pro-bullying attitudes were correlated with a 'desire for social success' factor that incorporated a deliberate lack of effort or

hiding of effort in class. This correlation remained even after removing the effects of various other interpersonal attitudes. It appears that the attitude 'nobody likes a teacher's pet' incorporates attitudes towards both bullying and academic achievement – and it may be a particularly prevalent and disruptive one, especially among boys. Interventions need to work out how to make it as uncool to be a bully as it is to be a swot, a telltale or a victim.

But how would you do this? I would be tempted to take the emphasis away from bullies and victims almost completely. By looking at reinforcers, assistants, defenders and outsiders as well as the bullies and victims (Sutton & Smith, 1999), interventions can exploit the social nature of bullying by targeting the followers and bystanders, the social support that allows the bully to build a reputation through their behaviour. Peer support systems provide a promising avenue here (Cowie, 2000). This may also address the 'it's easy...' step: increased vigilance by children and understanding of indirect bullying may reduce the opportunities children have for bullying. Clearly this mobilisation of peer pressure against bullying would not be simple; but if bullying can be made difficult and unrewarding, this may have the knock-on effect of reducing the obvious satisfaction that some children get from bullying.

**'...and it makes me feel good'** In Sutton *et al.* (1999b) level of involvement in bullying was positively correlated with understanding of emotion. Looking at motivations, I found something even more interesting. Saying that you bullied simply because you enjoyed it was correlated with both social cognition and, interestingly, with emotion understanding. It was as if children who understand the emotions their acts cause go ahead not only despite that, but perhaps even *because* of that.

Similarly, in Sutton *et al.* (2000) we found that theory of mind performance was associated with a factor on an 'avoidance of responsibility' measure called 'denial/lack of remorse'. This involved persuasively arguing when you get in trouble that you don't feel guilty because you didn't do it, and the correlation suggests that this persuasion might be facilitated by a good understanding of the mental states and emotions of others. Perhaps some bullies have 'affective social competence' (Halberstadt *et al.*, 2001), including efficacious communication of their own affect, and successful

## WEBLINKS

General resources:

[www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk)

Peter Smith's cross-cultural network project:

[www.gold.ac.uk/tmr](http://www.gold.ac.uk/tmr)

The Crick Social Development Lab:

[icd.coled.umn.edu/SocialDevelopment/](http://icd.coled.umn.edu/SocialDevelopment/)

Mike Eslea's 'Bullyweb':

[www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psycholl/bully/bully.htm](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psycholl/bully/bully.htm)

Ken Rigby's 'Bullying in schools':

[www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/](http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/)

For children, by children:

[www.bullying.org](http://www.bullying.org) and [www.pupilline.net](http://www.pupilline.net)

interpretation and response to others' affective communications. Halberstadt *et al.* note that affective social competence may be used for different purposes, and that 'some school-age children express anger on the playground to assert dominance, and within the school-yard peer culture this works quite well' (p.89).

Is the emotional style of bullies rooted in a Machiavellian but often realistic appraisal of interpersonal relationships? I have also found that children categorised as bullies scored significantly higher than controls on a 'Kiddie-Mach' questionnaire, measuring the belief that others are not to be trusted or are there to be manipulated for your own gain (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). In a subsequent study (Sutton & Keogh, 2001) we found that a 'lack of faith in human nature' was positively correlated with age (more so in boys) – children get more cynical.

If we are looking to understand the development of skilled manipulation or Machiavellian beliefs in bullying, internal working models of relationships provide one possible and powerful source of individual differences in interpersonal goals (see Crittenden, 2000). Ringleader bullying appears to be associated with insecure attachment (Myron-Wilson *et al.*, 2001): this insecurity may manifest itself in distrust and Machiavellian attitudes concerning human nature, which are related to bullying behaviour and attitudes (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). In my PhD the family factors of neglect, overprotection, and punitive parenting were all strongly negatively correlated with social cognition in the group of bullies, but not in the rest of the sample; in fact, punitive parenting was significantly positively correlated with social cognition in the victims. This suggests punishment style is very important in mental understanding. Perhaps the harsh, inconsistent discipline more common in the families of bullies (Olweus, 1993) is less effective in teaching empathy and understanding than inductive discipline is. There may be a big difference in terms of implications for social cognition and resultant emotional style between 'Go to your room' and 'Go to your room and think how would you feel if someone did that to you'.

If you were to tackle the 'it makes me feel good' step, I think empathy training is unlikely to be effective. In fact it is possible that empathy training could just improve the recognition and understanding of emotions and beliefs, which children with a 'theory of nasty minds' could then use for

antisocial purposes. Hare (1993) proposed a similar thing in his work with psychopaths, noting increased recidivism after intervention studies and commenting 'programs of this sort merely provide the psychopath with better ways of manipulating, deceiving, and using people' (p.243).

Emphasis should instead be placed on finding other ways to defuse bullying situations that don't necessarily demonise the bully or take their perceived power away from them. Perhaps interventions need to ask children not 'How would you feel if someone did that to you?', more 'How would you feel if you did something else instead?' Are there any other ways (for example using humour) that a child who bullies could come out of the situation with their reputation and someone else's feelings both intact?

### A shift to the positive?

We should emphasise the social in social cognition and the environment rather than the individual when discussing how to deal with bullying; we should avoid using the language of mental disorder to pathologise it. To retain an emphasis on individual 'deficits' could say more about society's need to explain and compartmentalise undesirable behaviour in terms of freakish deviance from the 'norm' than it does about the nature of the behaviour itself.

As Andrew Mellor of the Scottish Council for Research in Education says:

*We need to get away from the notion that kids who bully other kids are somehow different. Bullies are just normal folk. Their bullying is a result of the social situation they find themselves in, but there's nothing intrinsically wrong with them. In a different environment, they might not bully at all. (The Guardian, 25 April 1998)*

There is no doubt that increased awareness surrounding the issue of bullying over the last 20 years has been a positive development. It is now a legal requirement for schools in England and Wales to have an anti-bullying strategy. But the wording



is actually: 'The head teacher will determine measures with a view to...encouraging good behaviour and respect for others on the part of pupils and, in particular, preventing all forms of bullying among pupils'. It might be time for a change of emphasis to the positive – increasing good behaviour and respect rather than decreasing bullying.

In a broader context that takes into account school cultural climate factors, such as social competition and attitudes towards academic effort, the social cognition approach could play a useful part. It could emphasise the skills that some bullies have that could be put to pro-social uses if they had the environment and encouragement to personally benefit from this change of tack. A reassessment of the type of child that may bully and the socially skilled methods they may use could also increase the vigilance of teachers and classmates.

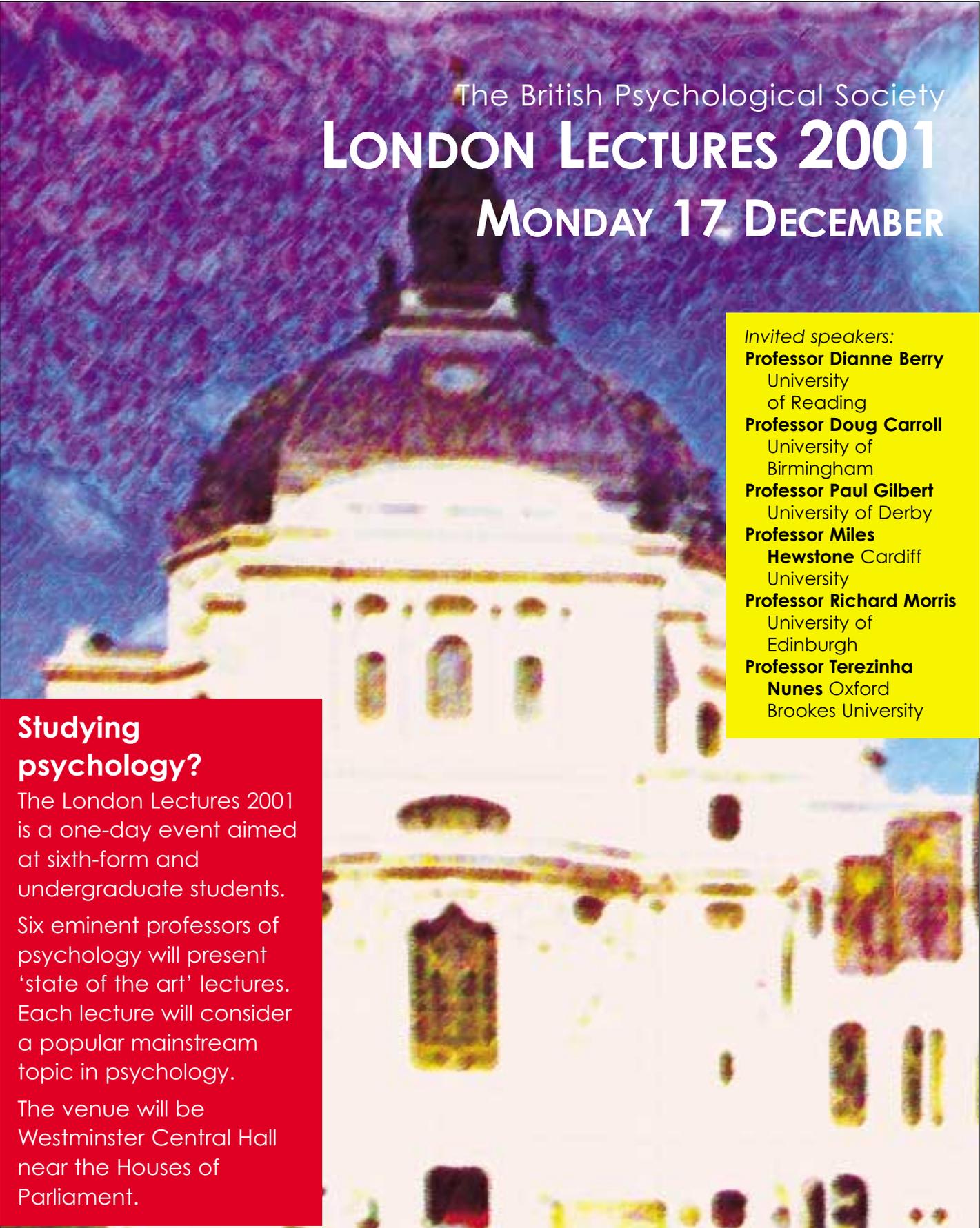
No doubt further research will suggest new ways in which the social cognition approach or adaptations of it could be used to understand and intervene in bullying. In the meantime we should perhaps move away from ritualistically denigrating the bully, and be surprised and thankful that more children don't bully because in many contexts it seems true to say 'It's easy, it works, and it makes me feel good'.

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