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In memory of Peter K. Smith: sparking a global research community with impactful bullying research

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ABSTRACT

We are very sorry to announce that Peter K. Smith, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and William Thierry Preyer awardee for Excellence in Research on Human Development of the European Association of Developmental Psychology passed away after a short but severe illness. Peter was an outstanding developmental psychologist with a special interest in children's social development, especially on children's play. His most extensive research has been on bullying and violence in schools where he also led a large number of research projects. Peter's research was characterized by his mission in building strong international research communities. Peter helped many researchers around the globe in setting up their own research agenda on school bullying including evidence-based interventions. Peter's professional career was not only characterized by highly impactful scientific achievements, but also by his kindness, generosity, generativity and great sense of humour. Peter was active in connecting and educating researchers until his sudden illness and transfer to the hospital some months ago. His ability to spark a global research community leaves a strong legacy.

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We are very sorry to announce that Peter K. Smith, Emeritus Professor of Psychology and William Thierry Preyer awardee for Excellence in Research on Human Development of the European Association of Developmental Psychology passed away after a short but severe illness.

Peter was an outstanding developmental psychologist with a special interest in children's social development, especially on children's play. His most

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extensive research has been on bullying and violence in schools where he also led a large number of research projects.

Peter received his B.Sc. at the University of Oxford and his Ph.D. from the University of Sheffield. Following his doctorate he continued at the University of Sheffield, obtaining a Personal Chair in 1991, before moving to Goldsmiths, University of London in 1995. There, he was Head of the Unit for School and Family Studies in the Department of Psychology from 1998 to 2011. He retired as Emeritus Professor of Psychology in 2011.

Peter's research was characterized by his mission in building strong international research communities spanning whole Europe and reaching as far as to Japan, China, India, Qatar and Australia. Peter helped many researchers around the globe in setting up their own research agenda on school bullying including evidence-based interventions. Peter's professional career was not only characterized by highly impactful scientific achievements, but also by his kindness, generosity, generativity and great sense of humour. Peter was active in connecting and educating researchers until his sudden illness and transfer to the hospital some months ago. His ability to spark a global research community leaves a strong legacy.

Impactful school bullying research

For researchers starting to study bullying in the 1990s, Peter's early publications were an extremely important resource. Together with his students and colleagues, Peter was among the few people publishing on the topic, and he published extensively. Besides making the first inquiries on the nature and extent of bullying, he was interested, for instance, in the family dynamics associated with bullying and victimization, as well as in bullying among young children. He developed innovative research methods, and he often complemented survey data with more objective assessment tools, such as the *Family System Test* to assess how bullies, victim and bully-victims portrayed cohesion and power relations in their families, or vignettes to measure theory of mind skills. He also combined quantitative questionnaire-based data collections with focus group interviews with children. For their large-scale cross-national study, Peter and colleagues developed a cartoon methodology, involving a set of 25 stick-figure cartoons depicting different social situations with peers (Smith et al., 2002).

Peter was active in bullying prevention early on, as evidenced by the Sheffield project in the UK (Smith et al., 2004). The project was not about implementing a single program in schools but rather providing schools with options that they could choose from, helping them to implement the selected actions and monitoring the process as well as the outcomes. The interventions ranged from curriculum interventions to playground work and

the development of whole-school policies against bullying. Besides several publications that borne out from the Sheffield project, it resulted in the anti-bullying pack '*Don't suffer in silence*' that was distributed to almost 20.000 schools in England.

Peter's study on the theory of mind skills of bullies was among the very few studies at that time challenging the 'social skill deficit view' of bullying perpetrators. It was found that 7- to 10-year-old ringleader bullies were better capable of understanding social cognitions and emotions than bullies' followers, victims, or children who tended to defend victimized peers (Sutton et al., 1999).

Peter was also the first who studied cyberbullying in Europe (Smith et al., 2008). To facilitate this line of research, he led the European Cooperation in Science and Technology Cyberbullying Action (COST ACTION IS0801) from 2008 to 2012. Furthermore, he edited the first special issue on Cyberbullying for the *Zeitschrift für Psychologie/Journal of Psychology* in 2009.

Peter also wrote several articles on the bullying research program and how it had developed across decades, first in the form of narrative reviews and later on utilizing bibliometric analyses. Peter and colleagues also studied the convergence among multi-national data sets involving self-reported prevalence data on victimization, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC), Global School Health Survey (GSHS) and EU Kids Online Survey, showing that the agreement of different datasets concerning victim prevalence rates across countries was quite low (Smith et al., 2016).

Peter authored and edited numerous books – one of the last ones being the book dedicated to late Dan Olweus – another pioneer in the field (Artinopoulou et al., 2025).

Testimonials from Asian countries

There are still relatively few researchers in Europe and North America engaged in bullying research who collaborate extensively with scholars from Asia. This is largely because it is difficult to find individuals who both share common research interests and possess the level of scholarly ability required for such collaborations. In the case of Japanese researchers, only a small number regularly participate in international conferences where research on bullying is frequently presented. One reason for this is that many Japanese scholars in this field are affiliated with universities focused on teacher training rather than research universities. As a result, they often face limited access to research funding and have few opportunities to supervise doctoral students.

Against this backdrop, Professor P. K. Smith stood out as exceptional. Rather than simply 'searching for' Asian collaborators, he took the time

and care to 'cultivate' their career. He welcomed many Asian scholars who shared his academic interests – fortunately, due to his international reputation, such scholars naturally gravitated towards him – as graduate students or visiting researchers at the University of London. Even after their return to their home countries, he maintained close communication with them, guiding them step by step through collaborative projects. These efforts included mentoring them in writing academic papers and book chapters, helping them make their international debut at conferences and supporting their development towards contributors to global research.

From the perspective of those he mentored, it never felt as though they were being 'trained for joint research.' Rather, it felt as if joint research was a means, and nurturing future scholars was his true purpose. About 10 years ago, Yuichi Toda expressed his gratitude to Professor Smith for the gentle and manageable steps by which he had guided, and he replied, 'Yes, that's what I was trying to do.'

It is not possible to introduce all the Asian researchers who were nurtured by Professor Smith here, but we would like to highlight a few in alphabetical order.

Professor Tomoyuki Kanetsuna (Kagawa University, Japan) began receiving guidance from Professor Smith in 1999 and earned his PhD under his supervision in 2004. One of their most important co-authored publications is Kanetsuna et al. (2006). Reflecting on his personal experience, Professor Kanetsuna recalls: 'I first met Peter when I was an undergraduate student at Goldsmiths, University of London. He gladly welcomed me when I expressed my desire to study bullying for my graduation thesis. He nurtured me not only as a researcher but also as a person.'

Associate Professor Dr Seung-ha Lee (Chung-Ang University, South Korea) completed her Ph.D. under Professor Smith's supervision at Goldsmiths, University of London (2007–2011). They co-authored several works, and she contributed to volumes he edited. Over 18 years, she received his constant support and mentorship. She invited him twice, in 2014 and 2021, as a keynote speaker for the Korean Society for Early Childhood Education. She recalls, 'He shaped my academic path and showed me what it means to be both a great scholar and mentor. I teach my students the way he taught me.'

Associate Professor Dr. Ruthaychonnee (Ruth) Sittichai (Prince of Songkla University, Thailand) began receiving guidance from Professor Smith in 2008. Her most valued experience was working with him at Goldsmiths, University of London (2008–2012) as a webmaster and financial secretariat. Through the COST network involving 27 European countries on Cyberbullying and co-authoring several impactful publications, she found his cross-cultural perspective truly inspiring. His patient support – through feedback, exploring

research ideas and sharing wisdom and humour – remains vivid. She treasures their conversations on academic and cultural topics. Professor Smith's influence on her career and personal growth is profound, and his legacy continues to inspire her.

Professor Yuichi Toda was one of the visiting scholars at Goldsmiths. Since 1998, Professor Smith connected him with many prominent researchers around the world. At the 2002 ISSBD conference in Beijing, Professor Smith introduced him to Professor Zhang Wenxin of Shandong Normal University, China, an encounter that led to mutual visits and a long-lasting friendship. Smith, Kwak, et al. (2016) brought together both Eastern and Western scholars to share their perspectives. In March 2024, Professors Zhang, Kanetsuna and Toda invited Professor Smith to China and Japan. On this occasion, he brought with him numerous books he had edited and presented them to Asian scholars, each bearing his handwritten messages.

Building a global community via collaboration

Peter will keep in our hearts not only because of his great scientific achievements, but because of his ability to connect people and to build strong communities. Fostering global collaboration is the key mission of the European Association of Development (EADP), because the EADP is convinced that collaborative research on topics with high societal relevance – like school bullying – is able to contribute theoretically sound and evidence-based solutions. Peter's passing leaves a huge void in our community. Our warmest condolences go to his family, close friends and collaborators. We will all miss Peter deeply.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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